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Standing Committee on Social Policy

Comité permanent de la politique sociale

Estimates

Ministry of Education

Ministry of Long-Term Care

Ministry of Colleges, Universities,
Research Excellence and Security

Budget des dépenses

Ministère de l'Éducation

Ministère des Soins de longue durée

Ministère des Collèges et Universités,
de l'Excellence en recherche et de la Sécurité

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44th Parliament

Thursday 1 October 2026

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44^e législature

Jeudi 1^{er} octobre 2026

Chair: Brian Riddell
Clerk: Vanessa Kattar

Président : Brian Riddell
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LEGISLATIVE ASSEMBLY OF ONTARIO

ASSEMBLÉE LÉGISLATIVE DE L'ONTARIO

STANDING COMMITTEE ON
SOCIAL POLICYCOMITÉ PERMANENT DE
LA POLITIQUE SOCIALE

Thursday 1 October 2026

Jeudi 1^{er} octobre 2026*The committee met at 0900 in room 151.*

ESTIMATES

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Good morning, everyone. The Standing Committee on Social Policy will now come to order.

Before we begin, I would like to provide some comments on the estimates process. In the past, members have been allowed to ask a wide range of questions pertaining to the estimates before the committee. However, it must be noted that the onus is on the members asking the questions to make sure the question is relevant to the estimates under consideration.

Are there any questions from members before we start?

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): We will now begin consideration of the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of Education for a total of three hours. From the Ministry of Education, we are joined by the Honourable Paul Calandra, Minister of Education; the deputy minister; and ministry staff. As a reminder, the ministry is required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues that the ministry undertakes to address.

I am now required to call vote 1001, which sets the review process in motion. We will now begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from the Minister of Education. Minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Awesome. Thank you, Chair, and thank you to the members of the committee for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the Ministry of Education's 2026-27 estimates. As was mentioned, I'm joined by assistant deputy minister Rupert Gordon and members of our senior leadership team at the Ministry of Education. I want to begin, of course, by thanking them and the thousands of public servants, educators, principals, support staff, child care professionals and others across the province who work every day to support Ontario students.

Mr. Chair, the Ministry of Education has, obviously, an enormous responsibility. More than two million students attend publicly funded schools in Ontario, and their parents trust us to make sure that when they send their children to school every morning, these children are safe, supported and learning. Taxpayers trust us to make sure

the significant resources they provide to our education system are being used responsibly, and students trust us to give them the skills and knowledge they will need to succeed after they leave our classrooms. Those responsibilities are at the centre of the estimates before the committee.

For 2026-27, the Ministry of Education's estimates include approximately \$39.4 billion in operating expenses. Within that, Ontario is providing \$30.6 billion in core education funding for the 2026-27 school year. This is obviously a significant investment by the people of the province of Ontario in our publicly funded education system.

Our position as a government is very straightforward: with record investments must come a clear expectation of results. More funding must translate into better outcomes for students. It must mean stronger reading, math and writing skills. It must mean safe and orderly classrooms. It must mean students attending school, participating in their education and being prepared for what comes next. It must mean parents get answers when something is not working, and it must mean that every part of our education system understands that its first responsibility is to the students it serves. This is the basis behind the work we have undertaken over the past year.

Chair, I have said since becoming Minister of Education that student achievement must be the guiding principle of our ministry. While that sounds obvious—the work that we undertake is guided by that, but when we look at a system as large as it is, it is very easy for the process, structures and institutions to become the focus as opposed to the student. Our job is to keep bringing the focus back to the student sitting at the desk. Can the student read at a grade level? Can they write clearly? Do they understand math? Are they attending school consistently? Are they getting the support they need when they fall behind? And when they graduate, do they have the knowledge, skills and confidence they need to succeed in university, college, an apprenticeship or a good-paying career? Those are the outcomes that matter.

Last week, Ontario received the latest EQAO results. There is encouraging news in those results. Students made progress in grades 3, 6 and 9, and literacy remained strong, with nearly nine in 10 students meeting the provincial standard in reading and writing by grade 6. We should recognize that progress, of course, and recognize the work of teachers, students and the families who have helped

achieve it. But we should not confuse progress with completion. Too many students are still not meeting the provincial standard. Achievement gaps continue to exist and outcomes continue to vary significantly across Ontario. Those results reinforce the approach we have taken: Use the evidence, identify where students are struggling, determine what is working and direct resources toward improving outcomes. This is why our government continues to invest in foundational skills.

The 2026 Ontario budget provides continued funding to support strengthened achievement, including investments in digital math tools and math facilitators, early reading supports and screening, online learning opportunities, student mental health and supports for students with special education needs.

We're also investing more money to give teachers across Ontario access to consistent, high-quality resources in their classroom. This year, we've invested \$60 million in modernized learning resources in a new province-wide digital learning platform. The goal is consistency and results. We are providing teachers with ready access to high-quality, curriculum-aligned materials so they don't have to spend their time searching the Internet for them or creating them from scratch.

We also know that people doing the work in classrooms need the resources to do their jobs. While school boards receive funding for classroom resources, we have not always seen those dollars consistently reach every classroom. For decades, teachers have told governments that they were buying basic classroom materials out of their own pockets. This is why we are putting funds directly into the hands of teachers to ensure their classrooms are equipped to support student achievement.

Beginning this school year, eligible elementary home-room teachers have direct access to \$750 annually for classroom supplies. Our government is investing approximately \$66 million per year in the new Classroom Supplies Fund. That funding is in addition to the millions in existing funding school boards receive for classroom and school supplies.

The idea behind the program is simple: We want the right resources getting into the classrooms. We want teachers to have what they need to support the students so they can focus on teaching.

That same principle applies to students who require additional support. Ontario's projected special education funding for the 2026-27 school year is approximately \$3.83 billion. Those resources support educational assistants, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists, psychologists and other professionals. They support professional assessments, specialized equipment, early math intervention and programs for students with complex needs.

Now, we know that no two students are exactly alike. For some students, success requires more support. Our responsibility is to make sure funding is available, but also to continue to examine where those resources are reaching students effectively and whether the system is producing better outcomes.

Mr. Chair, that brings me to accountability. Ontario taxpayers, as I said earlier, make an extraordinary investment in public education. That creates an obligation for every institution in the education system to operate with transparency, responsibility and relentless focus on students. As minister, I have made sure our government has acted when I believed that obligation was not being met.

We've seen examples of serious financial challenges, governance dysfunction and internal conflict at boards. These situations are not abstract governance problems. When leadership becomes distracted by dysfunction, it is students that pay the price. When finances are not managed responsibly, resources that should go to the classroom are put at risk. And when parents cannot get straightforward answers from their school board, confidence in the public education system suffers.

That is why our government has passed the Putting Student Achievement First Act. The legislation strengthens accountability across the education system and gives the province additional tools to make sure school boards remain focused on their core responsibilities.

It provides greater provincial oversight in areas including board finances, expenses, educational materials and student assessment.

It also modernizes leadership structures in English-language school boards by establishing distinct chief executive officer and chief educational officer responsibilities.

The purpose is straightforward: Running a large school board is an enormous operational responsibility. At the same time, improving teaching and learning is an enormous educational responsibility. We want clear accountability for both, and where boards face serious governance or financial problems that threaten their ability to serve students, the province must be prepared to act. We have demonstrated that we will.

Provincial supervision is not something that should be undertaken lightly, but neither should the Minister of Education stand by when persistent dysfunction or financial instability threatens student learning. Our expectation is simple: School boards receive billions of dollars in public funding. They're expected to manage those resources responsibly and keep their attention where it belongs: on students.

0910

Accountability also means accountability to parents. For too long, parents have told us that navigating the school board can be frustrating. When an issue cannot be resolved at the school level, families should know where to go next. They should not have to understand the internal organizational chart of a school board simply to get an answer about their child. That is why, at the start of this school year, we launched student and family support offices across all 72 boards. These offices provide families with an additional pathway to get answers, navigate more complex concerns and resolve issues. This is not about replacing the important relationship between the parent and a teacher or a principal; it is about ensuring there is a clear escalation pathway when an issue cannot be resolved. Parents are partners in their child's education

system, and our education system should treat them that way.

We are also bringing greater consistency to expectations for students, because showing up matters, participation matters, effort matters. Schools cannot help students if students are chronically absent from the classroom. We are continuing to strengthen expectations around attendance and participation because education is not simply about receiving a final mark; it's about developing the knowledge, habits and skills that students will need throughout their lives.

Mr. Chair, student achievement also requires the right physical environment, and in too many parts of the province, families have watched subdivisions go up faster than schools. Our government is changing that. Ontario is investing \$30 billion over 10 years to build, expand and renew schools. This September alone, 35 new expanded schools opened across the province. Those projects created approximately 18,300 new student spaces and more than 1,100 licensed child care spaces. Earlier this year, our government announced another \$1.6 billion for 79 school construction projects, creating more than 29,000 student spaces and an additional 1,900 licensed child care spaces.

But, again, announcing funding is not enough, because parents do not care that a project appears on a government spreadsheet; they care when the doors open. That is why we have been working to strengthen accountability around school construction, improve the capital process and make sure projects move forward more quickly. When taxpayers provide billions of dollars for school infrastructure, they deserve confidence that those projects will be delivered responsibly.

Our responsibility is also to make sure that the education students receive reflects the world they will enter when they graduate. The Ontario economy is changing, technology is changing, the labour market is changing. Students need strong foundational skills, but they also need a clear understanding of the opportunities available to them. That means exposing students to skilled trades, it means strengthening financial literacy and it means modernizing curriculum—and it means ensuring students understand that there are many different pathways to a successful career. A university degree is an excellent pathway for many students; college is an excellent pathway; an apprenticeship is an excellent pathway; and entering the workforce with practical skills is also an excellent pathway for many students. Our job is not to decide a student's future for them; our job is to make sure that they have the skills and information necessary to choose that future for themselves.

Mr. Chair, I'll talk briefly about child care. The ministry's responsibility for Ontario families, as you know, begins well before kindergarten. This week, our government announced that we reached an important agreement with the federal government that will provide greater stability for Ontario families and for the child care sector. Ontario and Canada have agreed to a four-year extension of the Canada-wide Early Learning and Child Care

Agreement through March 31, 2031. Under the extension, Ontario will receive nearly \$12 billion in federal funding over the next four years. This is obviously an important step forward.

For some time, our government has been clear with the federal government that the funding originally provided for its child care program did not reflect the actual costs of delivering that program in Ontario, and we were pleased that the federal government has recognized the need for additional funding. Now, as part of the agreement announced this week, Ontario will maintain current child care fees at an average of \$19 per day until June 30, 2027. That provides families with certainty and provides greater stability for child care operators across the province.

But our work is obviously not finished. Over the coming year, Ontario will continue to work with the federal government on a sustainable path forward for the child care program, including discussions about Ontario's share of the additional \$5.4 billion in federal funding announced earlier this year. Our objective throughout these discussions has been straightforward: We want a child care system that works for Ontario families and is sustainable over the long term.

It is also important to recognize that Ontario's commitment to families and early learning extends well beyond the federal child care program. Ontario has made significant investments in children and families for years. We fund universal full-day kindergarten across the province. We support EarlyON child and family centres. We support families through the CARE tax credit and other provincial child care and early years initiatives. And we continue to invest in creating new child care spaces, including spaces alongside the new schools we are building in growing communities.

This week's agreement is important progress. It provides stability for families and the sector, and it recognizes the funding pressures Ontario has been raising with the federal government.

Chair, the estimates review is fundamentally about accountability for public money, so I want to be clear about how I approach the responsibility. Successes in education cannot simply be measured by how much government spends. Governments are always very good at announcing large numbers, but a dollar spent is not automatically a result achieved. The question must always be, what did the investment accomplish? Did more students learn to read? Did math results improve? Did a student receive the special education support they needed? Did a new school open in a growing community? Did a teacher receive better classroom resources? Did a parent get an answer they otherwise would not have found? Did a student graduate more prepared for what comes next? Those are the questions that should drive decision-making throughout the education system.

Ontario is making record investments. We are putting more resources into the classroom. We are building schools. We are supporting special education. We are giving teachers direct access to classroom supplies. We are strengthening family supports for parents and families. At

the same time, we are demanding greater accountability from the institutions responsible for delivering those services. These two things are not in conflict; they go together. More investment should mean greater accountability for outcomes.

Chair, Ontario has dedicated teachers and education workers. It has engaged parents, it has talented students, and it has taxpayers who continue to make an enormous investment in success. Our responsibility is to make sure our education system continues to improve. We should acknowledge progress when it occurs, but we should be willing to ask difficult questions when outcomes are not improving, and we should be willing to challenge the systems that are not delivering for students. Because, ultimately, education policy is not about institutions. It's not about structures. It's about graduating a student walking across the stage when they are ready for the next chapter of their life. That is what the billions of dollars contained in these estimates are ultimately for. That is the standard against which I believe we should measure ourselves.

Our government will continue investing in Ontario students. We will continue supporting the teachers and education workers who serve them. We will continue building schools in growing communities. We will continue to support parents. And we will continue insisting that every part of the education system remains focused on the reason it exists in the first place: student achievement and student opportunity.

With that, Mr. Chair, I turn it back over to you and eagerly anticipate the questions.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister, for your presentation.

We will now begin with questions and answers in rotations of 15 minutes for the official opposition members of the committee, 15 minutes for the third party member of the committee, five minutes for the independent member of the committee and 15 minutes for the government members of the committee for the remainder of the allotted time. As always, please remember to make your comments through the Chair.

For any staff appearing today, when you are called on to speak, please give your name and your title so we may accurately record it. Thank you.

Now, I will go to the official opposition. I recognize MPP Pasma.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Thank you for being here, Minister. I appreciate that you mentioned transparency and accountability and difficult questions this morning, because that's what estimates is all about.

Diving right in: When you announced the \$750 to teachers for school supplies this year, I think there was some sense of relief. Because even though teachers shouldn't have to buy their own supplies any more than surgeons or construction workers are expected to, there was at least some sense of relief that this was going to mean a significant new influx of supplies in our very under-supplied schools, because it sounded like this was all new money.

Now, we find ourselves this fall with a portal that didn't even open in time for the new school year in 19 boards. It doesn't cover all teachers. It's charging higher prices for supplies than in store. It doesn't allow teachers to order all the supplies they actually need—but it does let them buy drill bits—and, in some cases, it won't even deliver supplies for more than a month.

0920

On top of that, it turns out it's not even all new money; \$300 out of that \$750 is coming out of the existing supply budget, which means that teachers are now being told by administrators that they need to buy more supplies than they did before. Some teachers are telling me that between the need to buy more supplies and the higher prices being charged through the portal, they're going to end up paying more out of pocket this year than they ever have before. So I think when you talk about success in education not just being government spending but about results, this is failing to deliver the results that teachers and parents and students should be able to expect.

I have got a few questions about this, starting with: You said you're investing \$66 million in this program. Is that \$66 million all new money?

Hon. Paul Calandra: No; \$40 million of it is new money. What we have done is that teachers across the province of Ontario were already supposed to have received an allotment for their classroom supplies from their principals. We found for many teachers that that allotment did not always reach teachers. It ranged from \$100 to \$300. What we said is, "Let's take that \$300 that you're already supposed to be getting. For teachers, let's add another \$450 on top of that. And as opposed to leaving it with the principal and hoping that they will give the teachers access to that money, we'll give it directly to the teacher." So that's how the \$750 is allotted to each homeroom teacher.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: But it's not each homeroom teacher. It's each elementary homeroom teacher. It doesn't provide any funding for secondary school teachers who also have to buy supplies. It doesn't provide any funding for teachers who don't have a homeroom, which includes music teachers and phys ed teachers who definitely need supplies for their classroom. In a school that has a lot of French immersion, like in the OCDSB—but it actually excludes one third of elementary school teachers.

These teachers are now being told that they have to beg their colleagues to order supplies for them. What about student achievement in those areas? Why don't they deserve resources in their classroom? Why don't those teachers also deserve support for buying school supplies?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Those secondary school teachers have access. There has been no reduction in the available resources for secondary school teachers with respect to their classrooms—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: But if \$300 is coming out of existing funding, then there is a reduction in funding available for them—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Not at the secondary level. There has been no change to that funding.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: But boards have an allotment for school supplies. Now, a part of that allotment is going towards this program for elementary school teachers, which means that there is an overall reduction in the amount of funding that is available for school supplies—

Hon. Paul Calandra: That is incorrect.

Ms. Chandra Pasma:—for all other teachers. So that does mean a reduction for secondary school teachers. It does mean a reduction for these teachers who don't have an elementary school homeroom. You are actually taking supplies out of these classrooms and forcing these teachers to pay more money out of pocket. This is not focused on student results, and it is not focused on the success of every teacher in the province.

How many teachers are actually getting the \$750?

Hon. Paul Calandra: The last count—and my officials can correct me if I'm wrong: Over 61,000 elementary schools have accessed the portal of that. There has been incredible uptake from them.

I guess the premise of your question, though, is actually proving the point. If you're suggesting that giving teachers access to the funds that they were already supposed to have access to would cause reductions in other areas, I guess it really does prove my point that teachers were never getting access to it. But there have been no changes at the secondary—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: It does not prove a point. What it proves, Minister—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One at a time.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay. I'm going to reclaim my time—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Sure.

Ms. Chandra Pasma:—because you're not answering the question that I asked—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Well, you're not giving me enough time to answer, but go ahead.

Ms. Chandra Pasma:—and apparently you don't understand that when you have a fixed pot of money and you are directing something to something entirely new, then there is less money for what that existing funding was going to. Now, I have heard—

Hon. Paul Calandra: It's not new, though. I guess that's where we disagree. The funding is not new.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I have not asked a question yet, Minister.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I know.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I have heard frustration from teachers that for even something as simple as a homeroom class number change—so they're not getting a new class assignment; it's simply the number of the homeroom class that changed—they're getting booted out of the portal. And this problem can't be fixed without going up all the way to the Ministry of Education, which is taking weeks to resolve this problem. Before, the ministry didn't have any role to play in local school board procurement. So this is new work that's being done by the ministry, and it's apparently taking them multiple weeks to do this work.

What is it costing the Ministry of Education this year to administer the program?

Hon. Paul Calandra: It is the boards who are giving teachers access to the portal.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: They may be giving them access to the portal, but when there is a problem, the boards can't resolve it. It is having to go all the way up to the Ministry of Education. So you talk about bureaucracy and red tape; that is what your program has constructed.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I think that the fact that 61,000 teachers have accessed the portal and there is a significant amount of teachers who are acquiring—I've heard a number of teachers who have texted me; one just last night said that the first time they accessed the portal—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm going to reclaim my time, Chair, because this is not answering the question that I asked.

When you say 61,000 teachers are getting it, what proportion of teachers is that in the province of Ontario?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Sixty-one thousand represents the homeroom teachers in the province of Ontario.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Yes, but what proportion of teachers is that overall in our education system in Ontario?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Again, it is just specifically for elementary homeroom teachers. It does not include secondary teachers—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay, but the question that I asked was for a number. What's the proportion?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I don't have that off the top of my head.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay. I would appreciate it if the ministry would provide that to the committee, actually. Will you do that?

Hon. Paul Calandra: No, you can simply find out how many teachers there are and divide that amount yourselves.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Well, there's transparency and accountability for us.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One at a time, please.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Moving on—and I hope this is an area where there will be some transparency and accountability—you just started spending taxpayer dollars on advertising to try to convince parents that everything is amazing in education. How much money is being spent on this advertising campaign?

Hon. Paul Calandra: You would have to ask that of the President of the Treasury Board.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: That's ironic, because the President of the Treasury Board said on Monday that she couldn't answer for you and that the funding was coming out of the Ministry of Education.

Hon. Paul Calandra: The money does not come out of the Ministry of Education; it comes out of the general advertising budget of the province of Ontario.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay. There seems to be a significant difference between what the President of the Treasury Board believes and what you believe. But you've mentioned repeatedly that student achievement comes first—

Hon. Paul Calandra: I mean, if you could find it in my estimates—

Ms. Chandra Pasma:—and funds need to benefit the student in the desk—

Hon. Paul Calandra: By all means, I'll admit to being wrong if you can find it in my estimates—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One at a time, please.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Sorry.

Minister, I don't have much time to ask questions on behalf of the people of Ontario, so I would appreciate it if you would respect the time that I have to do that.

You said student achievement comes first and funds should be going to benefit the student in the desk, so what's the public benefit of these ads? How is it benefiting the student in the desk that you're advertising to parents, telling them, "Everything is amazing. Don't believe your eyes. Don't believe what your kids and their teachers are reporting"? How does this benefit our kids?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Well, I would say this: Our union partners are spending millions upon millions of dollars tearing down the system—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Chair, I'm going to reclaim my time because that is not answering the question that I asked.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Shocking.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: What is your advertising budget for the whole year?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Is there an advertising budget? I'll just turn to my officials. I don't believe there is an advertising budget. Yes, it's zero.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Oh, interesting, because a script was leaked from your ministry that shows you are preparing attack ads against teachers in the middle of bargaining. So who is paying for those attack ads against teachers?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Any advertising that is done in the province of Ontario is done through the government advertising—the exact name, I don't know, but the Treasury Board will authorize that. You would have to look through their estimates for that. The Ministry of Education does not have an advertising budget.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Again, that's really fascinating, because there is a lot of distance between what the Treasury Board president and you are saying about this funding.

Moving on to another area—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Again, I stand corrected if it's in my estimates, by all means—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I didn't ask a question, Minister.

You've appointed eight supervisors, and you said you had to do that because of board deficits. How many of your eight supervisors have submitted a balanced budget for their board in the 2026-27 school year?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Again, as I said, with respect to advertising, if you can find it in my estimates, I'll be happy to correct the record on that.

With respect to board supervision, the eight supervisors have yet to balance the budget, but we have seen an overall improved position, I think, of over \$30 million across the system by some of the changes that were made across the supervised boards.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: That's a fascinating answer, because when you look at what the total cumulative defi-

cits that are projected by school boards are this year, it's \$186.7 million. What's the total deficit of the eight boards that you've put under supervision? It's \$135.79 million, so 73%, almost three quarters of the total cumulative deficit, is from supervised boards. How many teachers and education workers have your supervisors cut without even balancing their budgets?

Hon. Paul Calandra: As you will know, that is a significantly improved position on where they were the year before, as a matter of fact. Under the supervisors, we have seen—again, my officials, correct me if I'm wrong, but I think it's over a \$30-million—over \$30 million?

Interjection: Fifty million.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Oh, sorry; I stand corrected. Supervisors have returned \$50 million, so that is good—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Chair, I'm going to reclaim my time, because again—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One at a time, please.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I appreciate that. With respect to your question, I'm not—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm going to reclaim my time, because this is not answering the question that I asked, so much for transparency and accountability—

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Point of order, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Leardi with your point of order.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: A question was asked and I would be interested in hearing the minister's answer to it. 0930

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I would too, so I'll reiterate, Minister: How many staff have your supervisors cut to not even balance the budget?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Staffing decisions are made, usually, in April. I think what you're referring to is, in February, March and April of every year, when there are surplus notices that go out to teachers estimating the enrolment that might happen in September.

As we say every single year, the final number is matched by the actual enrolment that happens in September. At this point, I'm told, not only across supervised boards but across much of the system, that much of the surplus teachers have actually been recalled and that we haven't seen any long-lasting layoffs or removals or firings as a result of supervision under the boards.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Well, Minister, what was publicly reported is 1,623. I can tell you, it doesn't just include teachers; it includes education workers. I can tell you that, speaking with teachers and education workers across these supervised boards, many of them have not been returned to our schools and that it is having a significant impact.

But what's the total amount in dollars that went towards supervisor salaries and expense accounts in 2025 and 2026, and how much are you budgeting to pay them for salaries this year for them to not balance the budget again?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, the salary for supervisors. They have, I think it's up to—it's \$2,000 a day for a maximum of three and a half days of work. I think the absolute total comes to, again—it depends. On the larger boards—

Interjection.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, \$350,000, and at the smaller—Near North, it's a bit less. So at the larger boards, a maximum of \$350,000, and at the Near North board—it is a smaller board, so it is less than that. I think it's \$1,400 a day, maximum three and a half days of work.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: But how much did they actually bill, and how much have you actually budgeted for this year?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I budget the full amount, obviously. The supervisors, to my understanding, have billed less than their full entitlement.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: So have you budgeted for additional supervisors to be imposed this year?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Well, we'll see if there are boards that I haven't budgeted for, but if there are boards that don't meet the expectations of student achievement, then, as I said in my remarks, we will not hesitate to step in. I've been very clear, right from the beginning, when I took this position, that if a board failed to meet our expectations—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay, I'm going to reclaim my time, because this is no longer answering the question that I asked.

You say supervisors are billing less than they could, so how many days on average are your supervisors actually billing for work?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I don't know. I don't call them up every day and say, "Are you working today? Are you working tomorrow?"

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Hon. Paul Calandra: What I look at is the achievement that they're providing in the boards.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: But the whole point of billing the board would be that they're submitting invoices to the ministry in order to receive their income. So surely the ministry is tracking how many days these supervisors are billing—

Hon. Paul Calandra: They're paid by the board, not the ministry.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: And surely, when you want to be transparent and accountable in every single part of the education system in Ontario, that should involve reporting what is the Ministry of Education being invoiced.

Hon. Paul Calandra: They're paid by the board.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay, but you get all of the board's financial reports, so how much—

Hon. Paul Calandra: As do you, and as does anybody, so you can find those—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Yes, and I can tell you that the OCDSB financial statements are considerably less transparent than they were before you imposed a supervisor on it. And because there are only a couple of committee meetings that are actually happening in public and nobody is allowed to ask any questions, including the media, nobody can actually tell how many days they're billing.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

We will now go to the third party. I recognize MPP Collard.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Thank you to the minister for his presence today in this presentation, giving us some information that we would like to dig into. I will concentrate my questions on, surprisingly, French education.

I want to start talking about constitutional right to access. Of all the kids who have a right of access to French-language education in Ontario, only 59% have access. That's according to an FAO report from 2023. That means that 109,000 kids did not have access to a francophone school.

Since that report, can you tell us if there has been any increase in access, and what the numbers are for kids that have access?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Thank you for the question. I don't have updated numbers of what access is. But one of the things that you would have noticed recently in the Putting Student Achievement First Act was the minister's ability to take a more proactive role when it came to capital decisions. One of the reasons we did this is because we heard from a lot of the French boards that they were not getting access to schools that were surplussed by the public boards. That was causing a very big challenge because they're having to transport the kids a much further distance, and it was having impacts on whether somebody was going to send their child to a French-language school or not. This act allows us to intervene a little bit more quickly—what you're seeing in a place like Near North, for instance. Their school is never being transferred over, right?

M^{me} Lucille Collard: That's my follow-up question, because access is not just a question of having schools available, but it's also having them available within a proper distance. In regions in the north, it's a real problem—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, 100%. And then transportation.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: So, are you doing any kind of evaluation or analysis of where that capacity is not met, where the needs are? And what kind of strategy are you using to make sure that some of the budget—you say there's \$1.6 billion allocated for new schools. How much of that is going to new francophone schools, especially in the regions where there's none right now and families are forced to send their kids to English school because they won't put their kids on the bus for an hour to get to a francophone school? What are you doing to improve that situation?

Hon. Paul Calandra: This year marked one of the largest investments in new schools ever. Obviously, the boards direct us. They put their priorities towards us. This year was, I think, \$1.6 billion, one of the biggest investments in new schools—

M^{me} Lucille Collard: How much of that to the French schools?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I don't have the exact number of what went to the French schools.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Not even a proportion?

Hon. Paul Calandra: A significant amount, though, is going to French schools.

But the boards themselves put the priorities forward to us. I know in your community, for instance, there has been significant investments in new schools.

Mme Lucille Collard: But are there new schools in the north for people who don't have access to a francophone school?

Hon. Paul Calandra: We're certainly building that capacity where the numbers warrant. The school boards have told us these are their priorities. In a few instances, they've said to us, "Look, there's a school that is available to us if we could just get the transfer from the public board to our board." But then provide them with the money that they need to upgrade, in some instances, so we're doing that. Where boards have identified the need, that's where the ministry steps up.

Mme Lucille Collard: Okay. A follow-up question on that, because you keep saying that the boards tell you what their needs are. And we know that, in terms of new schools, the boards provide you with a list every year, ranked by priorities. How do you evaluate which of those priorities get picked? Because from my experience as school trustee, our first priorities were often not picked. It could have been priority number eight. What are you doing? Because there is a case explanation for each of those demands. Why are they not met? How are you evaluating the need and where the money's going?

Hon. Paul Calandra: It's complex in the sense that you have to look at, what is the enrolment? What is the capacity in the schools that surround it? There have been instances, and you will know from your time as a trustee, where sometimes a school was identified but it is in a catchment area where there is capacity at the surrounding schools.

It is complex. We look at, what's the capacity of the surrounding schools? What's the status of the school where they're in—

Mme Lucille Collard: Okay. I'm going to move on.

Hon. Paul Calandra: In your community in particular, if I just could quickly—

Mme Lucille Collard: No, I'm not thinking of anything particular. And regarding availability of schools for francophones, I'm just going to say that we also need new schools, not just hand-downs of run-down schools from the English boards. I think that they deserve that respect as well, not to be handed over just schools that are in need of a lot of repair.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Well, Arbour in your community alone is a significant investment. There's a number of investments that are happening, and that's where a board identified this is what we need. We have growing enrolment and we—

Mme Lucille Collard: Not enough. I want to move on to the teacher shortage, because John is going to take a portion of the rest of the time.

Talking about the teacher shortage—and we had that conversation, you and I, before—your ministry had a French-teacher-recruitment-and-retention strategy that ran

from 2021 to 2025, and your government specifically committed to measuring whether there has been a reduction in letters of permission, whether there is an increase in enrolment in French-language teachers' education and what's been done on the retention of qualified teachers.

Can you tell the committee how many teachers are currently working on a letter of permission in the 12 French-language school boards? What was the retention rate of teachers at the beginning of this period in 2021, when it was identified as the biggest problem, and what is it now? Are we seeing an improvement?

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Hon. Paul Calandra: Are we seeing an improvement in the numbers? Yes, we are seeing an improvement.

But we're still making significant investments in teacher education, as you know, through the college. Minister Quinn has identified and put additional resources for French teachers. The popularity of the French-language instruction is not just in our French schools, but it's also with respect to French immersion.

This is a challenge that we're facing not only in Ontario, as I said before, but across Canada. We've asked the federal government to help us with respect to some of the immigration challenges that we may have. The program itself has been successful, but clearly, more work has to be done.

Mme Lucille Collard: Okay. I think I'm asking—

Hon. Paul Calandra: I think it is good news—I'll say this—in the sense that the popularity of the French-language instruction in Ontario grows as the results from those boards seem to outpace results in other boards.

Mme Lucille Collard: Yes, clearly, but they still need the support—

Hon. Paul Calandra: A hundred per cent, they do.

Mme Lucille Collard: —which is clearly lacking. We have teachers that are leaving the system just because they don't have the support in their classroom.

I think I'm asking you too many questions. I did ask you how many teachers are currently working under a letter of permission in those francophone boards. Do you have that?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I don't have that, no.

Mme Lucille Collard: Okay, and you also don't have the retention rate that was in 2021 and now what it is today?

Hon. Paul Calandra: You'll understand, I'm going to have to—

Mme Lucille Collard: Okay. So why are you not publishing a report on that strategy? You had a five-year strategy, and yet we have seen none of the results of this strategy. Why are you not publishing the report?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I'll certainly take that under advisement. As you can appreciate, I was prepared for estimates today, so that is not something that I was prepared to answer. We'll take it under advisement.

Mme Lucille Collard: Okay. You referred also to how there was additional French-language spaces that were created. Namely, there were 40 at l'Université de l'Ontario français. How many of those additional spaces were ac-

tually filled? How many students graduated and are now teaching in our French schools?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I would have to ask Minister Quinn on that, and I'll endeavour to do that and give you an answer in the House.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Okay. I want to move to special education, I guess. Francophone children with autism, learning disabilities or other special needs should not have to choose between receiving appropriate supports and receiving an education in French. What portion of special education funding is actually being directed to French-language boards this year, and does your ministry measure whether francophone students have comparable access to special professionals and services?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I'll have to phone a friend on that one. Come up to the table.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Minister, do you want to call him up? Or call her up? Sorry; my apologies.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: If you have the information. But if you don't, I'm going to move to another—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Please state your name and your position.

Ms. Yael Ginsler: Thank you. Yael Ginsler. I'm the assistant deputy minister in the student achievement division with the Ministry of Education.

What I can tell you is that for special education in the province, the province budget for that is nearly \$4 billion at \$3.83 billion for the 2026-27 school year. The funding—that's through core education—includes funding for differentiated needs, which looks at various school boards with respect to their student populations. This is where there would be differentiation for smaller school boards, for rural school boards, for French-language school boards through that \$1.33 billion—

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Okay. I'm just interested in the number for French school boards. Do you have a number or proportion of that money that is going towards the French boards?

Ms. Yael Ginsler: I don't have that with me now. I have to take that back.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Okay. I'll ask, maybe, an easier question that doesn't call on specific numbers—

Ms. Yael Ginsler: Oh, I do now—thanks. For French-language specifically, it would be \$287 million.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Okay. And how many French-language boards currently report shortages of French-speaking psychologists, speech-language pathologists, behavioural specialists or other specialized staff, and what specific funding is available to address these shortages? Are French boards reporting that they have insufficient specialists available?

Ms. Yael Ginsler: The ministry does provide funding for specialist teachers and education support workers. Those would include, exactly as you've spoken about, psychologists, child and youth workers, educational assistants. We provide that funding to school boards through the allocation model. It is then over to school boards to make those local decisions based on the unique needs of the

individual child in their school board. We don't prescribe that, just because the needs are so different for every child.

There is dedicated funding, for example, for students who require two or more educational assistants. There is a special fund specifically for that that school boards would allocate.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: But French boards do report that they need more funding for those specialists, because I certainly hear that from parents who have kids with no supports in the classroom, so there's definitely a gap there that needs to be addressed.

Ms. Yael Ginsler: I know that the government has increased that. I can say over the last 10 years we've added 10,600 additional education staff, including over 4,700 educational assistants. Again, that would be for both systems.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: I'm going to move to a different topic.

Minister, French-language education is not simply English-language curriculum—I think you're sensitive to that reality—translated into French. It has a cultural mandate to transmit and strengthen Franco-Ontarian language, history and identity.

How much of the ministry's budget is actually allocated for French-language resources? And how much is being delivered through francophone service providers?

I think you might know what I'm referring to. In June, you announced like \$600 million for the Edwin platform—

Hon. Paul Calandra: It's \$60 million.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: All right. Okay. That's a large amount of money.

Edwin is an anglophone platform with some French translated content. Would you agree that this is not appropriate for French-language schools, especially when we have French-language service providers for pedagogical resources?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, and that's why the French-language school boards have the ability to use that funding for different resources as the Edwin platform increases its availability—working with French educators, the Edwin platform will increase its availability of French-language curriculum items. But at the same time, those boards are allowed to use those resources differently because of that.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Are you saying that, of that \$60 million, there is a portion that's going to be redirected to francophone boards so that they can decide to get a service provider in French?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: How much of that \$60 million is going to go to—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Whatever they would have been entitled to under the Edwin platform.

Some are still using the Edwin platform, to be honest with you. Some have used it. There are resources available to the French boards, but it was always meant that those resources would increase over time on the Edwin platform. So it's not a surprise that that has to be improved. It's also

not a surprise that some of the boards want to help in improving what is available to them.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: I want to go back to the “par et pour les francophones.”

Hon. Paul Calandra: I’m sorry?

M^{me} Lucille Collard: “Par et pour”—you know, the principle that French education needs to be delivered by francophones for francophones, and therefore it needs to be reflected in the governance model.

I know you said when you got Bill 101 adopted that the governance for francophone boards would not be affected. However, after the adoption of that legislation, you sent a directive to the school boards—all the school boards; not only the francophone boards, but including the francophone boards—that the trustees are no longer allowed to take training unless it’s on their own dime. They’re not allowed to pay “cotisations” to their French association, like the ACEPO and AFOCSC. That is a huge problem—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: We’ll get back to it.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): We’ll now go to the independent member for five minutes. I recognize MPP Clancy.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Thank you so much. I appreciate you coming here and answering questions about your ministry. I’m grateful that you’ve reached an agreement with the federal government to make sure CWELCC continues. We’ve had a number of new schools in our area, so I do appreciate the amount of money and priority of building new schools.

I’m concerned. The FAO says that the budget will grow by 0.6%, and that’s the lowest level of increase since 1995. Can you explain why, at this moment in time where we see increased demand for special education supports, teachers talking about more needs in the classroom, I have kindergarten classes that are way over 30 kids in their class. Can you explain why you aren’t keeping up with inflation, let alone what is needed?

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Hon. Paul Calandra: The FAO projections obviously don’t include what might result in the settlements that we’re currently negotiating with our educational union. Close to 85% of what we spend on education is through wages and salaries; we are unaware at this point of what that might be, going forward. We’re still in that negotiating phase with them. Obviously, for future years, the funding will be adjusted to reflect those changes.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: This year alone, the cuts are close to \$500 million—\$453 million, to be exact—and when you add up the reduction of funding since 2018, it’s said to be \$6.5 billion, when you consider inflation.

What are you hearing about the impact of these funding shortfalls from teachers and education workers?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Well, I would say the same to you—you have access to the estimates going back, and the budgeting from 2018. If you can find in those estimates a

direct cut to education, please point it out—not an accounting adjustment, but a cut to education.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Do you not recognize inflation? For a fiscally responsible government—you continue to forget about inflation, though. Why do you not consider inflation when you’re talking about record dollars?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Record dollars have been spent on the education system, under this government. Frankly, every government has increased spending in education year over year; I don’t recall a time when governments have reduced funding. Classroom funding has increased this year alone; we’re at over \$42 billion in total spending. But as I said, it doesn’t matter. I want results. It doesn’t matter how much we spend. If the results don’t reflect the spending, then we can’t pat ourselves on the back.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Can I make some suggestions? I know, as somebody who was working in schools, especially with our most needy students, as a school social worker after COVID, that the needs have changed. If you talk to any parent, if you talk to any education worker, they will tell you the situation is very different now.

Can you tell me about the gap between the demand for special education support and the funding per student, percentage-wise?

Hon. Paul Calandra: We’ve systematically increased support for special education since we’ve come to office—a significant increase in special education. We’re up to, as the ADM said, about \$4 billion in special education.

I think the point that you’re touching on is the important point: The needs in special education are greatly different, and year over year, it is changing all of the time. I don’t think that governments have necessarily—not just our government; governments before us—paid attention to how quickly that is changing. I think sometimes people get confused—I shouldn’t say that.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Will you get me that amount, that percentage gap?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Sorry, I only have five minutes.

Will you get me the gap between the demands and actual funding, percentage-wise?

Hon. Paul Calandra: That’s hard to do because you don’t really know the demands. One year’s IEP is different—

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I got a percentage from my board yesterday—if you ask.

Hon. Paul Calandra: It really does change all the time. This is the one thing we have to deal with. There are teachers in our schools who will have six or seven different IEPs, and that wasn’t the case many years ago. So that has changed, and we have to be able to better address that and—

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Why hasn’t the percentage of funding per student for special education increased, then? You’re acknowledging that you’re hearing that the demands have increased, but I’m hearing that the percentage per student for special education has not increased.

Hon. Paul Calandra: We have invested billions of additional dollars in special education every single year that we have been in office, and we will continue to do that. But ultimately, it's the outcome that matters—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

We'll now go to the government side for 15 minutes. I'll recognize MPP Pang.

Mr. Billy Pang: Thank you, Mr. Chair. Through you, to the minister: Thank you for your presentation earlier.

Minister, you've been clear, since taking on this role, that you want to refocus Ontario's education system on student achievement. As a parent of a high schooler, can you please talk about what that means in practice and how the investments in these estimates support that objective?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I continuously say this—and I know it's not just me, frankly; I think it's anybody who has been the Minister of Education. We may have different ideas on how we approach it, but I think, ultimately, we want the same thing: our kids to be successful, not only in their daily educational lives but when they leave the system.

There were a number of things that we saw in the system and that we have continued to see throughout our time in government. One of the things, when we started back in 2018, was "How do we go back to a back-to-basics approach to certain things?" We've updated different curriculums to reflect that.

When we came to office, every single year in the preceding 10 years that we came to office, EQAO results were declining, whether it was in math and in literacy, reading and writing. You're now finally starting to see those results increase year over year. Every year, we're seeing an increase—back-to-basics phonics on literacy, back to basics on math.

We had the big challenge, obviously, of COVID—a massive, massive challenge that confronted us. We knew there would be some challenges from that. But what are we doing? We're investing in teachers. Teachers have said to me, "We need better help when it comes to curriculums. It's great that you as a minister and you as a ministry give us a curriculum, but we need better supports in helping deliver that curriculum." That's where the Edwin product that we have introduced and made available to all teachers comes online to help them build their curriculum so that there is also a consistency. We've updated curriculums in geography, in math and financial literacy for our students.

But we've also gone a step further. We've also said that for our secondary students, participating matters and being there matters, so a portion of their marks will be reflected in the investment that they're making in their own education.

Another part of it, too, is the facilities. Building new and modern facilities is also important. We've heard that from Madame Collard when it comes to French-language students, but we've seen that across the province. We have to get shovels in the ground and we have, to the tune of \$30 billion; \$1.6 billion last year in our communities for new schools and expanded schools.

Ultimately, it's building schools, giving teachers the resources that they need, holding students accountable, but also providing them the resources that they need so that they can succeed—and the different pathways. It's not just about university. As I said, it's not just about college. It might be about apprenticeship. It might be a combination of all of them. Or if your path leads you out of high school to a job, we have to have you prepared to be able to be successful in that.

It is a reimagining of the system, but by focusing on how you get that, and that's by focusing on the teachers, giving them the resources that they need so students can succeed.

Mr. Billy Pang: I just want to follow up on that. You put exams to the high schoolers again. When I talk to those high schoolers, they hate that. The parents love that. How can we balance this?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, for sure.

There are some students who will have never written—their first time that they will have written an exam is in university. I've been in a lot of classrooms, frankly, and one of the things I heard from a lot of teachers in the secondary level is we have to go back to the future, in a way. We need better control of our classrooms—attendance matters, participation matters, but also an exam matters.

One of the things I keep hearing from teachers is a culminating exam will help them determine who is actually grasping the information and not just using AI to get to a certain point. The pressure that comes—and I'll be honest with you: There obviously is pressure that comes with writing a final exam that is worth a portion of your mark. I can understand why students would be hesitant on that. But the teachers I have spoken to, the educators I have spoken to and the advice that I have gotten says that that will help prepare students for their future endeavours, no matter where their lives—whatever path it takes them, this will help them and give the educators the confidence in knowing that their kids are actually getting what they're being taught.

I think it will prove to be one of the most positive changes that we—and, if I may, just conclude by saying this: It's not across all boards. There were many boards that still had exams. There were many boards that still that were still doing this. We're just elevating to those that were performing best.

Mr. Billy Pang: Okay. Thank you, Minister. There's one more question.

I want to follow up that you've often said that simply spending more money does not necessarily mean better outcomes. You've just talked about a lot of outcomes. So how is your government making sure increased education funding is translating into better results for students?

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Hon. Paul Calandra: And that has to be the thing. Often, what you'll get is—look, I'll say this: It's easy for any minister of the government to come up and say, "Everything is great." It's not so easy to say sometimes that we're not meeting our expectations.

When we look at the EQAO results, they're positive. There are many things that are positive about those results. We're seeing some of the most amazing results in literacy across the system, some improvements in math overall across the system. Every single year, those math marks have gone up, but not at the speed at which we would like, and I don't think at the speed at which parents would like.

So last year, we said we have to do a deeper dive into this, so we announced a broad-based review of EQAO which is focused on how we improve student achievement at its heart. We talked to a lot of educators and said, "What are some of the challenges that you're facing?"

Where we have seen difficult challenges, especially in math, we've put in special resources into priority schools, and we've seen those numbers start to get better—math teachers; better resources; screening for literacy in the early ages, which has proven to be an incredible tool in helping identify and then ultimately helping students achieve success as they continue their path throughout the education system.

So it's targeting resources where it's needed sometimes, looking at what's working and what's not working and not being afraid to acknowledge that if the results aren't what you expect, you have to act on the results. It's great we accept and we take these results once a year and you claim victory in some and defeat in others, but then you've got to act on it. And that is what we're doing, is acting on it. Where we see some challenges, we're acting on it. Where we see things that have been positive, we're going to try to make that consistent across the system.

You'll hear that a lot from me—consistency, consistency, consistency—because where it's working, we should allow that success to be a hallmark of the education system across the province, not just in select areas of the province.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Jordan.

Mr. John Jordan: Thanks, Minister, and to your ministry for all the work you've been doing to improve our education system.

Just a bit of a follow-up on your focus on the foundational skills—the reading, the writing and the math: Can you speak to the investments being made this year relative to that and the accountability, or what you expect to see? What's your goal with that?

Hon. Paul Calandra: As I said, we looked at the previous year's results in EQAO when it came to math for instance, and we looked at some of the schools that were performing significantly below. We call those priority schools, and we added some additional resources into those schools to see what the outcome of those additional resources would be. The latest round of EQAO results showed significant improvement in those priority schools.

The back-to-basics approach on literacy, going back to phonics—what an incredible change that has meant in our system. But also, as I said, the screening for literacy in the early years has also helped our educators identify who might need more additional supports through their educational pathway.

So there is a lot that is happening, a lot of investments that are going to continue to be made on all of those fronts.

But it's not just in those areas, right? We talk a lot about reading and literacy and math, and those are absolutely foundational, foundational skills, but there is so much more that encompasses a child's educational success. That's where we've looked at different curriculum. We changed the kindergarten curriculum, and I think you will find by and large that educators have praised the changes to the curriculum.

Now, granted, we delayed it a year, as you know, because we didn't think educators had enough time to prepare for it. But since then, what we have heard is nothing but praise for the work done on the kindergarten curriculum. So it starts at the beginning, and then it is support that will go right through the system.

But it's consistency. I know some people get frustrated by it—but consistency, consistency. You can't be looking at one part of the province and accept that their students shouldn't do as well as students in another part of the province, and even within boards. Sometimes in the same region, one board will have much better results than another board. So what's the difference between the two? Why is one doing better than the other and what can we do to make sure that both are receiving that amount of success? Targeted resources where they're needed, consistency across the province, giving teachers the resources that they need and parents the support that they also need to ensure that their kids succeed.

Mr. John Jordan: Thank you, Minister. Along that consistency line, you've taken steps to strengthen the oversight of school boards. Why did you believe greater provincial accountability was necessary and what do you expect boards to do differently after that?

Hon. Paul Calandra: In the instances where we assume responsibility through supervision, it's obvious. Eight different school boards we've assumed responsibility for, through supervision, is almost 50% of the student population in the province of Ontario. There were a number of reasons why that was happening, whether it was board dysfunction, whether it was deficits or immediate decisions that would've caused harm to students.

But what we're saying to all boards—and I think they all have come along on this—is that we have to refocus: less focus on the noise and more of a focus on student achievement and listening to what educators need in order to get those results. If you stray from that, then we'll put you back on the right path.

When you look at the changes we made to the governance of schools not under supervision, there is a new CEO position, separating the CEO from the chief educational officer, so that one can focus on business and one can focus on the educational side, where a board deems that to be a proper function. That is also about achievement and results.

I'll conclude with this: It's about the ministry also stepping up and taking responsibility. Ultimately, it is the Ministry of Education that sets the rules. It is the Ministry of Education that funds education across the province of

Ontario, and it is not enough to simply download and say, “It’s your job, and we leave you to it.” We have to show that leadership, and the ministry is stepping up and doing that.

Mr. John Jordan: Yes. Thank you, Minister.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Racinsky.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you, Minister, for speaking with the committee this morning. I want to begin by thanking you for your support of key investments in my community, like the expansion of Sacred Heart elementary school in Rockwood, as well as a \$9-million expansion of St. Mary elementary school in Elora. I really appreciate those investments in my community.

I had the opportunity on Tuesday to ask the Minister of Finance about respect for taxpayers, and when I go and speak with residents in my community, they want government to be prudent with their hard-earned taxpayer dollars, and I will always stand up for and advocate for the hard-working taxpayers of Wellington–Halton Hills.

In my riding, there has been considerable discussion about school board spending and governance. How are you making sure that the record amounts of education funding the government is making are actually reaching the classrooms and supporting students?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Just before I get to that, I just want to actually highlight that in one of our supervised boards, the Near North school board, we actually relied on Halton public’s Mike Wildfong, who came and assumed responsibility for reconstructing a school that had gone completely off-path, so I owe him a debt of gratitude on the work that they have done. And also, just to highlight some of the EQAO results that are coming out of that community, they are quite astonishing. So they have been really, really wonderful stewards.

Look, the core education funding, as I said—some of the core education funding—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Thank you, Chair.

Much of the core education funding is enveloped, so you can make sure that the money is going to where you want it to go across the system. But as I said, look, this all has to be about student achievement, right? When you put money into education, I think parents expect—it’s a multi-billion-dollar ministry. You’re talking about \$43 billion, and it is easy for a Minister of Education in the province of Ontario to go around the province and the country and say, “Look at how much we’re spending.” And even in other jurisdictions, if the money does not equate to results, then you have accomplished nothing.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

We’ll now go to the official opposition and I recognize MPP Pasma.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I’m going to turn to special education. The Auditor General underlined in her report this year on special education exactly what school boards have been saying all along, which is that they are spending hundreds of millions of dollars more on special education

than what they’re getting from your government. I’ll note that that’s just one of many reports over the past couple of years that highlight how badly your government is failing kids with disabilities and special needs. The system is being held together with shoestring and duct tape, and that’s for a system, still, where almost a quarter of kids with disabilities aren’t able to attend school full-time, and more than 21,000 kids with disabilities aren’t attending school at all.

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You would, of course, have had access to the AG’s report before it was released, because you have the opportunity to respond to her recommendations, and your responses are included in that report. And yet, just days after that report was tabled, you released this year’s core education funding, and per-student funding for special education is a cut in real terms. You didn’t even give a funding increase that keeps up with inflation, let alone eliminate that gap that the Auditor General highlighted.

In fact, per-student funding for special education teachers, EAs, speech-language pathologists, occupational therapists and psychologists is actually going down in nominal terms. Last year, it was \$928 per student; this year, it’s \$927 per student. You asked us to find a cut? There’s a cut: \$927 is less than \$928.

So why, when the AG had literally just told you about the funding problems in special education, would you choose not to allocate sufficient funding when you knew about the problems?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Well, I would disagree with you on that one. As I said, special education funding has increased year over year in this government. It was at historical lows, frankly, when we took over. If I’m not mistaken—again, my officials can correct me later if I’m wrong on this, but I think it went somewhere from \$2.2 billion to \$3.9 billion in our time in office. So, every single year we have increased funding for special education.

Obviously, during COVID there were significant additional resources that were put in place that are no longer required in certain circumstances. So as that funding lapses as we transition out of the COVID supports, you might see a reduction in one area.

But it also doesn’t reflect the additional investments through REP and FEP. It also doesn’t reflect some of those responsive educational programs that have been put back into the core education funding so that these organizations don’t have to apply year over year over year for that funding. And as school boards identify those children that need special supports—which will come—the resources will be made available for them.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay. First of all, Minister, since your government came to power, boards have put a cumulative \$2.3 billion out of what should have been general education funding into special education, so your funding has never been sufficient, even if you increased it more than what the Liberal government was putting towards special education.

And I can’t believe that you would say that our kids need fewer teachers specialized in special education, fewer

EAs, fewer occupational therapists and speech pathologists just because COVID is not happening, when what the AG highlighted is that in two of the boards that she looked at, fully one third of students who need an assessment are waiting more than a year to get that assessment.

When the finance committee was in Renfrew county earlier this year for pre-budget hearings, we heard there that the Catholic school board only had funding to allocate two assessments per school in the board for the 2025-26 school year. So, too bad for number three onwards. And if you're number nine or 10 on the list at your school, good luck getting an assessment before you graduate.

So, why would you say this is just COVID funding that's going down, when you can see the results? You told me you were focused on results for the students in the schools. The result is, kids are waiting more than a year for an assessment. And when they get the assessment, they're not getting the supports that they need. So why is funding going down from \$928 to \$927 this year, when the needs aren't being met and the Auditor General highlighted just how badly the system is failing kids with disabilities?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes. Again, funding for special education has increased in the province of Ontario. It continues to increase every single year.

But as I said to MPP Clancy, we have to look at special education in a more fulsome way, I think. When I look at the last EQAO results, I am actually quite troubled by the fact that there is still a large spread between those who are identified special education and those who are not. I don't think that is acceptable in Ontario.

I've talked to a lot of teachers who have told me that something has to change with respect to how we deliver special education in the province of Ontario, a lot who have said it's not just about money; it's about how we deliver these programs—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay, I'm going to reclaim my time, Chair, because that's, again, not answering the question that I actually asked.

It's not just kids in special education who have a large number of unmet needs in our schools. Kids are in large class sizes; they're not getting the academic support that they need because of that. They're not getting the mental health and special education supports that they need. And yet, year after year, your government has failed to keep up with the rate of inflation and enrolment growth, when it comes to education funding.

The estimates show—this is on page 14 of the briefing book, if you need to confirm—that funding for the elementary and secondary program is only increasing 0.6% this year. The Financial Accountability Officer has the same calculation: 0.6% this year. But the FAO said that in order to maintain service levels—so not even to address any of the challenges; just to avoid making things any worse than they already are—you would need to increase funding by 2.6%. The FAO also said that the real spending per student for school board operating grants is going down by \$66 per student this year and by \$365 per student over the next three years.

I'm struggling to understand why, when our kids desperately need more support, not less, you would cut funding education once again and not even just maintain the level of funding that's needed to maintain service. Even though that service isn't great, at least fund it to maintain the level of service now. Why won't you do that?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Core education spending is actually up this year, as you know, despite the fact that enrolment is down significantly, including in your board. So we've maintained that funding while enrolment has gone down.

The FAO would have no concept or idea, nor should the FAO, of what future—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm sorry, are you saying that the FAO doesn't know what they're doing?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Well, they would not know what next year's budget is or the year after's budget is, right? You would agree with that. Unless they're Nostradamus—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Well, next year's budget is in the Ontario government's budget. You have three-year projections in the budget. The FAO is basing the analysis on the budget that your Minister of Finance tabled. You're saying that the FAO can't read the document? Or you're saying your finance minister isn't actually tabling numbers that reflect what your government is planning to spend?

Hon. Paul Calandra: The FAO would not have any idea what the government intends to spend on education in years going forward. The FAO would also not know where teachers' salary negotiations would go over the next number of months. That would not be reflected in the go-forward budget estimates of the province of Ontario.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: So you're saying, in the negotiations, you're planning to increase funding by that 2.6% that the FAO says is needed to maintain current service levels? That's what you're targeting in negotiations?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I'm not targeting anything. We're negotiating with all of the unions. We're negotiating in good faith, and we'll come to a deal, like we always have.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Shouldn't you at least be targeting to maintain current service levels? Teachers and education workers have made it clear that they're targeting funding increases that would decrease class sizes and make sure kids are getting the supports that they need. I would hope, at least, you're targeting; not making things worse in the education system.

Hon. Paul Calandra: It's not my position that I'll impose a contract on our teachers.

I also recall that your own critic on finance asked us to reduce funding in health and reduce funding in education.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: We're talking about education here, Minister, not health.

Hon. Paul Calandra: She included education too, which we flat out rejected.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay. You claimed that core education funding increased by 1% this year, when you announced it. That's already less than half the rate of inflation that your government was predicting and significantly less than what it has actually been year over year.

What you failed to mention and have still not acknowledged publicly is that the overall funding for education isn't going up by anything nearly that much. You absolutely gutted responsive education funding. A whole bunch of those programs were moved into core education funding, but you didn't replace them with anything.

So there's significantly less money in that folder—nearly two thirds, in fact. You took away \$200 million from education without saying anything. You took away another \$92 million in funding to education partners and official-language projects. You were just saying earlier that you've increased funding to special education through the responsive education funding, but I don't know how you could do that when two thirds of the funding disappeared overnight.

Just to give you an example of the impact, the OCDSB has a deficit of \$3.5 million this year, and that's after they cut 182 staff positions. The amount of funding that they lost through responsive education funding—and this was publicly reported on at the audit committee; it's in their budget document online—is \$6.6 million. So if you had just maintained that level of responsive education funding, the OCDSB would not have a deficit this year.

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You talked about transparency and accountability and how every part of the education system needs to demonstrate that and how parents should be able to count on accountability. Where's the accountability here? Where's the transparency? Why not just publicly report on the numbers as they actually are?

Hon. Paul Calandra: The programs for responsive education were put into core education funding so that, on a yearly basis, they didn't have to reapply and worry whether they were getting the money or not. The programs proved to be successful programs, and that's why they were moved into core education funding.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: And that's fantastic—

Hon. Paul Calandra: So, as opposed to being funded on a yearly basis—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: —but then replace the funding with something else—

Hon. Paul Calandra: —they are funded permanently through—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One at a time, please.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: —or add additional funding to core education funding to replace that.

But that's not what you did. What you did was gut responsive education funding, present that as if that was a considerable increase to core education funding and didn't replace that \$200 million with anything else. So that is one reason why boards like the OCDSB are running a deficit. The supervisor could have gotten rid of it if the OCDSB hadn't lost \$6.6 million through that cut.

Hon. Paul Calandra: That is actually incorrect.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Well, then you should take that up with Bob Plamondon, because—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Well, I don't have to.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: —that's what was being presented at the—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Actually, the estimates are quite clear on that. But you're wrong.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: —audit committee of the OCDSB. That's what's on—

Hon. Paul Calandra: You're absolutely wrong.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: —the public documents of the budget of the OCDSB online. I encourage you to look them up afterwards so you can read it for yourself.

Moving on: What is the total amount, in dollars, of the school repair backlog?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Look, we're spending over \$30 billion over 10 years to ensure that we have modern schools, replacing schools. I think over \$300 million this year will go towards RAAC, replacing some of the schools that have old and outdated equipment—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Chair, I'm going to reclaim my time, because that wasn't an answer to the question that I asked. I asked for the total amount, in dollars, of the school repair backlog. It's not an essay question, simply a number.

What's that total amount in dollars?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Look, I can tell you that we're repairing and updating and replacing schools at a historically, not only fast—they said this year—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: So what's the dollar amount? What's the historic dollar amount here?

Hon. Paul Calandra: It's \$1.6 billion this year alone, which is the highest level ever; \$300 million for RAAC—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay, Chair, I'm going to reclaim my time because I asked for a number. You're not giving the number.

Whether you are willing to be transparent and accountable for that number or not, we know that the repair backlog is getting worse. Last year, the FAO reported that fully one third of schools in Ontario are not in a state of good repair and that, if your government doesn't step up with additional funding for school repairs, then by 2033, 75% of schools in the province will be below a state of good repair.

And yet, this year again, you've provided \$1.4 billion towards school repairs. Yes, you provided a little additional money for those reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete roofs—which I'm not complaining about—but that funding doesn't address the problem of crumbling ceilings, leaky roofs, mould in our schools. And these issues need to be urgently addressed for the safety of our kids. You said the physical environment our students are in matters. It matters when our kids are in school buildings with mould.

And yet, your government has never increased funding for school repairs. It has been \$1.4 billion every single year. If you just kept pace with inflation, there would be \$330 million more to reduce that school repair backlog this year. And that is just to stand still, not to actually reduce the size of the backlog.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: So what's going on here? Where's the sense of urgency? Where's the plan to actually eliminate that school repair backlog?

Hon. Paul Calandra: As I said, this year alone, we're at \$1.6 billion; 29,000 additional student places—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: And \$200 million of that is for roofs?

Hon. Paul Calandra: This is \$300 million for the RAAC repair. It is the highest level ever spent in the province of Ontario. I'm quite proud of that. It follows up on last year's results.

As I said in my remarks, I think some 35 schools were opened this year. We will have a record funding announcement, a continuation of record funding for new schools and renovations of old schools. So I think that's a good use—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Chair, I'm going to reclaim my time because we've moved on from talking about the school repair backlog.

I'll just note that even if \$1.4 billion is more than what the previous Liberal government spent, spending the same amount for eight years is, in fact, a record. It's a record failure to actually keep up with the pace of inflation and make sure that our kids have safe school buildings to learn in.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister. We'll now move on to the third party. I recognize MPP Fraser.

Mr. John Fraser: Good to see you, Minister. It's been a while. I just want to thank everyone from the ministry who's at the back of the room.

As a Catholic, we call it purgatory. You're just sitting back there waiting to be called up, maybe, and having to listen to us. And I'm sorry—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Are you expecting to go to purgatory?

Mr. John Fraser: What's that? Pardon me?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Are you expecting to go to purgatory, John?

Mr. John Fraser: I don't think I'm going to make it to purgatory. The escalator's going one way: down. I'll try not to get myself any further down.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: I'll say hello on my way up.

Mr. John Fraser: Okay. Well, good luck with that.

I do want to say one thing, just when we start out, which is that in my memory, in the mainline ministries in the Ontario government, health and education, every year, we've had historic spending. That's not what we're here to talk about. We already know that's going to happen. We always spend more. It costs more. Sometimes there's more kids. We know that. It's actually what the results are.

I want to start with a story—a couple of stories; bear with me because I want to try to underline student and family and educator experiences.

I have a neighbour. He's a principal in a middle school in Ottawa—great principal; great school. He knows all the kids, is deeply involved—very active school in the community. I was talking to him about some of the stories I had heard when I travelled around the province from

parents and educators and principals about what was happening in our schools, about how they weren't safe places to learn or to work. He says to me, "Well, last Thursday, I'm in my office, and a 12-year-old girl threw a chair at me." I went, "Wow," and he looked at me—he's not one to exaggerate—and he said, "It's just another day."

I have a friend who's 70 now, went back for one year to teach kindergarten. She had a student with exceptional needs and hard-to-control behaviours. Ended up the first day—she got scratches all over her arm. She went in to the vice-principal and said, "Look," and the vice-principal's reaction was not, "Oh, my God." It was, "I guess you'll have to wear long sleeves," like it was a normal thing to happen.

My sister just retired as an SSL. I've talked to EAs. I've talked to teachers. I've talked to parents. Every day in Ontario, elementary classrooms are shut down—every day—because of a student behaviour and an unsafe situation. I think that's a problem. Would you agree, Minister?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, I do.

Mr. John Fraser: Okay. Thank you.

I want to go to how we might have this problem as we look forward. I thank my colleague MPP Pasma for raising the issue of special education. We know that the Auditor General clearly identified that boards were not getting enough money in their special education envelope. We know, in the last year, at least as it was reported by the OPBSA, that 70 of the 72 boards spent about \$800 million more on special education than they actually received.

It's interesting; we were talking about the school supply money, that it wasn't going to where it needed to be. Maybe the principals were having to look under the cushions to find money to fund the needs of children with special needs.

We know we have a policy of inclusion in our schools, which is important. I think that's good. We don't have the right environment in those classrooms. But if you look at what the ministry has done in response to that identification of underfunding in the envelope, if you just look at the raw numbers, it's like, "No, it's not a problem."

Can you explain to me why the gaps that exist in special education that have been identified by the Auditor General and the Ontario Public School Boards' Association have not been filled in this year's estimation of the budget? If you take a look at the increase—and I don't want to talk about factoring in inflation; I won't even say that, although we could do that—it's not even close.

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Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, thanks for the question.

First, let me address it in two ways, and you can interrupt me any time you like, but I'll say this: I tend to agree that we have to do something different on special education than what we're doing right now. I don't think that the existing funding is giving us the results that we want, and the more I talk to educators one-on-one on this, they are reflecting disappointment in the model the way it currently is. That doesn't necessarily mean that they all have a solution. As you probably can imagine, there are

many different ideas of what we have to do differently on that.

As you know, special education funding through the core education—funds can be moved. Enveloped funds can be moved into special education from other areas of the core education funding. Special education funding itself is enveloped, so no money can be removed from that. So there is flexibility for our boards to do that.

But I'm not going to argue with you on it. I think we have to do better on special education. I don't think we are meeting the needs of parents, and it's not reflective in the growth of how we categorize special education too, right?

Mr. John Fraser: Thank you. I'm going to try to give you a—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, yes, no problem.

Mr. John Fraser: I'm going to try to respect you having the ability to give an answer, but I do—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Just put your hand up and I'll stop.

Mr. John Fraser: —I only have so much time. Yes, I'll put my hand up.

But here's the thing: We know there's a large dollar gap. We're not getting into the details. We know there are hundreds of millions of dollars that aren't there that need to be there that are being taken away from somewhere else. So what's happening right now, while we're trying to find a solution, is that the people on the receiving end are carrying the weight of that—the children. The children are feeling the effect of that money not being there, whether or not we're doing it right at the schools, whether or not the ministry has got it right.

Respectfully, we're eight years in. You have been government for eight years. We're in the ninth year. I think we've established the fact that the government is not funding special education properly. The Auditor General said it, the boards have said it, and, Minister, you can recognize that there's a problem.

But I want to move into the next step, because I want to try to create a picture of what's happening in our classrooms. I mentioned we have the inclusion policy, right, which means that if we underfund special education, it directly affects the classrooms—all the students in the classroom, not just the student who's not getting their needs met. That's why it's a problem when classrooms have to close down because of behaviours.

The next thing is class sizes. If you take a look at the growth of class sizes over the last eight years, we can see that they're incrementally growing larger. And then if you look at the elementary panel, or at least four to eight, almost half of our students are in classes of over 25 students—24.5 is the average; I know we don't cap it. Actually, 45% are between 25 and 29, and about 4% have more than 30 students. That's a lot in a classroom. We all know—what's the best thing for education? Smaller class sizes; more attention to a student.

If our class sizes are growing—and somebody might say, "It's only 4% that are over 30." Well, that's about 33,000 students. It's a lot of students, a lot of kids, when you think about it—33,000 students. So if our class sizes

are growing and we're not making them smaller, we're not putting a cap on those, we're letting averages play out, where some kids will have a great classroom—they'll have 24.5 and other kids will have 30 and, well, that's just too bad, too many of them—and a whole bunch of them will have between 25 and 29.

In the estimates, are we actually trying to get class sizes down, given that we have this policy of inclusion, our class sizes have grown, and we have this problem in our schools, especially in our elementary panels, with classrooms getting shut down? What in the estimates reflects an effort, if you're doing that, to get class sizes smaller, and how much?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, well, you will know that we already have some of the smallest class sizes nationwide in the province of Ontario. Look, average—I'm not even going to read you the numbers, because we'll quibble over the numbers, right? It doesn't matter that I tell you that 90% of our classes between grades 1 and 3 have an average of 19.4 kids. It doesn't really matter. What I think ultimately matters—

Mr. John Fraser: I'll just say, I understand that, and that's good.

Hon. Paul Calandra: And I know that's not the argument that we want to make. I don't conflate that inclusion as being a challenge with—it's not the reason why we have large class sizes. It adds complexity to the class. I agree with you on that; it certainly adds complexity to the class. And that's why I think on that, we're in agreement on it. We have to take a look at that and how we can improve that circumstance.

But, ultimately, look, I'm proud of the fact that Ontario has some of the lowest class sizes in the entire country. We're going to continue to maintain them as best we can across the system. The funding reflects that. The construction of new schools reflects that. The improvements of schools and the addition of schools reflect that. We want to continue on that path, but it's no secret that our educational partners are talking about that as well.

Mr. John Fraser: Okay. Thanks.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Sorry.

Mr. John Fraser: No, it's no problem. Like I said, I'll give you the chance to be able to answer the question respectfully. It shouldn't be a soliloquy from my end, although it might feel that way sometimes.

Hon. Paul Calandra: You do so well at it though, John.

Mr. John Fraser: Thank you very much. I appreciate that—which gets me to the next point.

When you take these things and you add them up, what's at the end of the equation? EQAO, right? And if we take a look at the results in EQAO, and I think it should be a concern—I know it's a concern to the minister—that our students' math scores, the results are bad, and they're not really improving. In actual fact, if you take a look from grade 3 to grade 6, only 7% of the kids who didn't meet it in grade 3 could meet it in grade 6.

Numbers don't lie—if you take a look at what we're saying here, which is, the ministry is not giving enough

money to fund special education and boards are scrambling for a lot of money. And our class sizes—and, respectfully, maybe they're small in comparison to other provinces. I'm actually looking at what works, and a classroom of over 30 between grade 4 and 8, it doesn't work if you're one teacher. And 25 to 29, that's pretty big too. We set a target of 24.5.

So how do we expect to get the results that we want or that we need—actually, no: the response that our kids deserve so they can achieve—if the inputs don't match what it is we're trying to do?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Look, I'll say this: Under the previous government, EQAO results went down every single year. So in math and literacy, year over year, the results declined every single year.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Hon. Paul Calandra: That was predominantly because ideology started replacing pedagogy in some of our schools, and we saw the results of that really hit home. By 2018, we started to go back to basics on literacy, bringing back phonics, math, and every single year those results started to increase.

But agree with you. On math in particular, they're not where I want them to be, especially on the split between special education and the other students.

Mr. John Fraser: We're eight years in. Those math scores aren't what they should be and, what you said—the ministry needs to step up and take responsibility. You said that, and we shouldn't be downloading things onto people. What we're doing to boards and principals and educators and parents and kids is, in special education, we're downloading on them. It's that simple.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I agree with you. We can do better on special education. I think it is somewhere where the province, for many, many years and many administrations, has failed, and we all have to accept responsibility for that, and I think we can do better on special education. I think EQAO results reflect that as well.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

We will now go on to the independent member for five minutes. I recognize MPP Clancy.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I have to echo my colleague MPP Fraser. I've heard from a lot of teachers and EAs that there's a big amount of burnout from the staff due to student behaviour and well-being. I'm really concerned about the impact of social media and the Internet on our kids. I see jurisdictions around the world putting in curriculum, holding big tech accountable, doing research to understand the impact of the Internet on our kids' mental health.

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You know and I know that the mental health needs of our students have exploded. I used to see massive problems regarding mental health—anxiety and depression, addictions—in maybe later years of high school, and now I'm seeing them in the junior grades.

What are you going to be doing to address the inadequate supports for mental health, to treat the symptoms

but also address the root cause of online impacts? MPP Collard and I have talked a lot about this. I need to see more from your government.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Well, we've increased funding for mental health, specifically, in our schools. That's one element of it.

We recently sat down with the federal government, provinces and territories to discuss—I think it's Bill C-34, which is their online harms legislation, and how education will play a role in that; specifically, access to social media and how we can limit that access to social media for kids.

One of the most dramatic cuts that we're expecting from the federal government very soon is a multi-billion dollar cut to mental health supports and a reduction in transfer payments from the federal government. I appreciate that they have priorities. So that is a challenge that we will be seized with over the next little bit.

We're reviewing the existing cellphone ban and what impact that is having. Is it effective enough? And hearing from teachers—do they have enough support in that?

So there's actually a lot of work being done on this—a continuation of some of the work that started during COVID and post-COVID—but I think more work needs to be done.

The number one goal right now is working on Bill C-34 with federal, provincial and territorial governments, maintaining the support for mental health in our system, reviewing the existing cellphone ban to see if it's working, and then talking to the federal government about the pending cuts to—

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I would like to see more in the K-to-12 curriculum to inoculate kids from being lured into these problematic and addictive concerns. We would also like to see some research, some committee put together, because this is early years, it's health care, it's MCCSS—it's all these ministries together, and I think because everybody is playing whack-a-mole, we're not addressing the root causes. That's why you see inclusion without support equalling abandonment and major burnout amongst our staff.

One area where I am also concerned is things that your government just isn't paying the bill for. It's like saving money when you go out for supper with your friend, but your friend saves money by passing the bill to you and having you pay for it. How are you paying for the student and family support offices? How are you paying for the equity officers you mandated? Are you paying what it costs to pay CPP? I'm hearing that you said to schools that they have to spend this money. I'm hearing from schools that they're not even covered for EAs. No wonder kids have to stay home. Their EA might be sick, and all of a sudden they can't go to school.

Can you tell me why you mandate that schools provide certain things—like a student and family support office etc., or having to pay CPP—but the school boards aren't given the money from you? They can't have a bake sale to fill in this gap.

Hon. Paul Calandra: On the student and family support offices: It's a reorganization of the people who were already doing the work. The superintendents in—

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: They didn't have a job before?

Hon. Paul Calandra: The superintendents in most of the schools—when something was elevated from a teacher to a principal—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Hon. Paul Calandra: It would go to the superintendent of a school board. You were at a school board, so you would know this. The superintendent would then authorize or ask somebody to help them find a solution. So, as opposed to having many different superintendents doing it, what we've done is taken the existing people who are doing it in a board and put them in an office that parents can then contact immediately, with the existing superintendents who provide—

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: So you'll agree, at least, with this: that it was an announcement with no new money. So you're giving—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, 100%. It didn't need new money. It's about reorganizing how you actually deliver it, so that parents can actually have access to it quickly and they know where to go. I think that is the—

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: What about CPP? Why aren't you covering CPP costs? They have no choice but to pay CPP. And it doesn't meet what it costs.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Again, that is the big problem throughout the system. Every time that something—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

We'll now go to the government side. I recognize MPP Racinsky.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you, Minister, for recognizing the great work that Halton District School Board does. It's a wonderful region, and I'm happy to be able to represent that great community.

I want to go back to governance and administration. Like you mentioned, it's a \$40-billion ministry, and many of the boards have reached the billion-dollar levels. They're very large organizations.

I want to ask you if you could explain why the government decided to separate the chief executive officer and chief education officer in English-language school boards and what problem that reform is intended to address.

Hon. Paul Calandra: It really was identifying that in many boards, these are multi-billion dollar—the Toronto District School Board is an over-\$3-billion enterprise. It reflects the fact that in many of these boards, the people who were undertaking the delivery of these massive resources on behalf of the province of Ontario didn't necessarily have the skills that they needed in order to manage those types of funds. We wanted to ensure that those managing the funds—the business side of the board—and those who are managing the educational success of our students were separated, so that the two of them had very unique but very consistent mandates for achievement on both of them.

That is why we made the change to allow people who are non-educators to be able to run a board. Before that,

you had to be an educator simply to run a board. You'll probably recall, when the legislation was passed, one of the union presidents—Joe Tigani, if I'm not mistaken—said that while he himself was not qualified to run a board, he thought that other people within his union might be able to run a board. Under the previous system, none of his members would have ever been able to even apply. We didn't think it should be shut out from qualified people. The administration and running of a board should be a—many people should be shut out of that.

The changes simply reflect good governance and the ability to focus more closely on student achievement.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Pierre.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: Good morning, Minister, and thank you for your remarks—also, a huge shout-out and thank you to the ministry officials who are joining us today, and ministry office staff, for the work that you continue to do to support education for students in our province.

I want to talk to you a little bit about the student and family support offices, just picking up on the previous question from the independent member. I know in my riding, initial feedback—I know these offices are very new. They're getting very positive feedback from parents, who sometimes didn't have a path forward or didn't know a path forward and were struggling with getting answers to their questions in a timely manner. I'm hoping that you can tell us a little bit about the problem that these offices were designed to fix.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Not only is it to help parents and students have direct access to information that they might not have otherwise had; it's also about relieving pressure for teachers and for principals. Obviously, still, a parent is going to go to the teacher first, if there's a challenge that they have; they're going to go to the principal to escalate it. Often, that meant continued challenges between a parent, a teacher and a principal. Now what you have with these offices—you can actually elevate that to the student and family support office. You will know that a file has been opened. You will know who is taking care of your file. You will know the progress of your file; as a parent or a student, you will know where it is. There is a responsibility to call you back in a certain amount of days. There's a responsibility to have an answer back, I think, within five days, with the exception of some of the most complex cases. So it's not only about giving students and parents better access.

I heard from a lot of parents, too, who said, "Sometimes I would have a really easy question that I hated to ask the teacher. But I was able to get a quick callback and a response from the office."

So it's about reducing conflict in the school. It's about giving parents and students immediate information, and knowing who is taking care of the file and where in the process they are of getting an answer, and getting back, in a timely fashion—holding people accountable.

The other part of it is then downloading that to the ministry so we know: What are the things that people are

talking about? What are they complaining about? Is there something that we can do to make the lives of students, parents and teachers easier? That's the information that we get out of these offices, which we weren't getting before. And I think that's why they have been so successful.

1050

In some of the supervised boards that had these offices prior to September, the feedback has been very, very encouraging. We have some school boards that just opened them; they had a responsibility to open by September. Some said, "We want to open up our offices even sooner. Can we do that?" Of course, we said yes. I think it will become more and more popular.

The goal, ultimately, is that nobody calls these offices because everybody is happy. But the reality is, people are always going to have questions, even if it's as simple as, "How do I download my kid's report card?" Maybe they don't want to bother the teacher. Somebody at this office can give them the information they need.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: The feedback that I have received has been around the service standards and the timelines and getting a response back in a timely manner to an issue, and not feeling like you're kicking the can down the road and having to go and speak to someone else.

I think the point that you made about data and the ministry having additional information about what kinds of problems there are, going forward—it gives you more information to be able to maybe get out there and make some proactive changes. So thank you for that.

The other question I have is around expectations around student attendance and participation. I know there were some changes made and implemented this year, and I'm hoping that you can talk to us a little bit about what you expect those changes to make in terms of student achievement—what kind of outcomes are you looking for, and how will you measure to see if this change has been effective?

Hon. Paul Calandra: This was something that came really directly from teachers at the secondary level. Almost every time I visited a school, somebody would be asking me, "Do you remember what it was like prior to 2006, when participation mattered and when attendance mattered?" So we did some additional research on this and asked, "What do you suggest?" The teachers were the ones who actually developed this policy for us, frankly—their advice and their suggestions.

I think it's simple: You have to show up. As a student, we expect you to be there. Attendance has to matter. Participation has to matter. That participation can take many different forms. It still relies on the professional judgment of our educators; I don't think any of us would suggest that it should be any other way. I respect teachers' ability to make decisions, and I respect their professional judgment. But that, combined with a culminating final exam, I think, will better prepare students for the world that they'll face when they leave school. There's a lot of accountability within the system.

I won't tell you who, but maybe one of my daughters had a bad attendance record. She got great marks but had

a bad attendance record. It was sometimes difficult to get her to go to high school, frankly, because she was doing so well. She said, "Why do I need to go? I'm doing so well. My marks are great." Good for her. I'm extraordinarily proud of her. She's now at a university. She has a scholarship. She's doing extraordinarily well. But the challenge that that adds to a teacher—when kids are popping in and out of the class; when some other child is working really, really, really hard, but it's not necessarily coming naturally to them and they can't see their efforts reflected in a portion of the mark.

I think that is the difference that this will make. It gives secondary teachers better control of their classroom. That is what they've said to me. I think that's what the goal of it is. It just prepares kids better for the future ahead.

If my daughter is watching, she's going to kill me, but—

Laughter.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Firin.

MPP Mohamed Firin: Minister, I want to thank you and your staff for taking the time to be here with us today.

It's easy to create a mess. It might take me a second to spill a cup of coffee, but it takes about five minutes, maybe two minutes, to clean it up. I've got a five-year-old daughter, and I can tell you that it can take her about five minutes to tear up the whole house, but it might take a day for me and my wife to fix it.

Between the years of 2013 to 2018, this province saw, under the previous Liberal government, 600 school closures. Not a lot of people are here from that time. My friend the leader of the third party is here today. He was here at that time. He's a good sport. I like him, as a member. But the fact is that in those years, 600 schools closed. You can do a basic Google search and find that information. You can correct me if I'm wrong. In that time, as well, the NDP obviously was there, supporting the Liberal government for a couple of those years.

Since 2018, my understanding is—and you can correct me if I'm wrong—we've had zero school closures in that time. Now, when I drop off both of my daughters at school, I see a big blue sign that says there's construction happening in the school.

I want to thank you for a Catholic school by the name of St. Fidelis that was built in my riding.

Announcing a new school is not the same as actually building one.

What changes has the government made to speed up school construction and hold boards accountable for delivering projects?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Let me just say this: I remember when my kids would mess up the house. Now, being an empty nester, I would give anything for my house to be messy, because it's really quiet.

Having said that, there are a number of things you touched on that I think are important here—when you talk about how hard it is to fix something after it has gone off the rails.

I mentioned earlier to one of our colleagues that every single year, for almost a decade, results were going down. Year over year over year, results were decreasing and weren't going in the right direction, and it was very much reflective of changes that were made based on ideology as opposed to what is in the best interests of students. Once that had gotten itself baked in, it was very difficult to move the ship. It becomes very, very difficult.

So when you reintroduce curriculum, you then have to train your educators. After a decade of going in one direction, you have to train educators and rebuild the capacity for them to achieve the results that you want. So does it take time? Absolutely, it does.

When you talk about, how do we deliver on capital projects—I'll give you a very tangible example. I talked about the Near North school board, a Parry Sound school. It was over 10 years that that project had been approved—10 years—and shovels could not get in the ground. For one reason or another, the trustees just could not get their act together. Every year, they would change their mind. "We're going to build it." "We're not going to build it." The previous government provided funding for this school. By the time they actually got to getting a shovel in the ground a decade later, the community had completely changed. Then they completely botched every part of the construction project. I'll say two things about that: Not only did they botch it because they were fighting with each other; the rules just weren't in place for the ministry or the minister to step in easier. So whilst we knew something was going off the rails, it was so hard to undertake supervision of a school.

Now we've modified the capital process so that the minister can take a bigger responsibility, and quicker, so that we don't have kids learning in half-demolished schools.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Hon. Paul Calandra: This is why, in the instance in Near North, we asked Halton, which has the ability and the experience, "Will you send your person up to manage this project, to get shovels in the ground and fix all of the deficiencies?"

The one thing I will say in this conclusion is that sometimes school boards don't build schools for a very long time, for one reason or another—their enrolment is not growing. They should also not be left on their own.

The update that we have given supports all school boards—those that are building all the time and those that might only be building on occasion. It gives more responsibility to the ministry. And the ministry should have always accepted that responsibility, given the billions of dollars that we're spending on capital projects.

So, quicker, faster, and with greater oversight from the ministry—so that we never have another Near North, Parry Sound High School situation happen again.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): We'll now go to the official opposition. I recognize MPP Armstrong.

1100

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: First, I want to say good morning to all the staff and the minister, my colleagues, and the Legislative Assembly staff. Thanks, everyone, for making this possible. I think we forget how hard the assembly staff work to allow us to engage in these conversations.

I want to start by reminiscing as to how we got here today with regard to the child care file.

Last year, we had an Auditor General's report that came out on the child care sector, and it was quite scathing, in my opinion. It was revealed that the government wasn't meeting targets with respect to spaces. It was revealed that the government wasn't meeting targets with respect to hiring RECEs. As well, there were no metrics or mechanisms to monitor the results of what was happening in that file, and honestly, that was a little shocking to me. When we're sitting here talking about the responsibilities and duties of our job, that would have been, I think, a basic requirement of the child care file, whatever minister it was at the time—today, present, past. That's something that should have been handled.

The fact that the Auditor General had 11 recommendations to make that ministry work properly and the ministry has agreed to implement them all—I have a little hesitation that that will actually come to fruition, because there's a lack of communication when it comes to how things are progressing on this child care file.

I point to the example of when the minister announced that they weren't going to renew the program at that time and they were going to start negotiations. That was nine months of silence. We understand that there are very private matters, delicacies that we don't need to know details about. However, we could have been informed—"Talks are ongoing. Progress is being made." None of that happened. And do you know who actually was the recipient of that silence? Parents, so anxious and nervous about if they were going to have child care—nine months, they were waiting. Workers, who have always been on tenterhooks waiting for this government to report back conditions—because the government talks about their own workforce plan for recruitment and retention. And operators were concerned because they had to actually present their budgets to the ministry. We know there are deadlines—March 31. So people were worried and stressed out about what was going to happen, and they heard nothing. When the minister did come forth a couple of days ago and give us that announcement, I think people were—literally just a sigh of relief.

What does that mean, going forward? We appreciate that the government has negotiated a further agreement on this file. And there are many things—I do have a question coming up with respect to estimates, but I do want to give this preamble. There are many things that people are worried about because of the ongoing silence up to this point and the announcement that's being renewed.

In anticipation of coming to the estimates meeting, I spoke to families, parents, workers and operators, and one resounding message I got was that they all want to keep

this child care system universal, they want to keep it non-profit—the majority—and they want to keep it affordable, because, literally, child care is a driver of the economy. If people can't get good, affordable, safe, quality child care, they choose to not go back to or enter the workforce. But where the resounding message came from is that—we can build all the spaces, we can do all that, but if we don't have the stable workforce, we're in trouble.

So I go back to the estimates; I know the minister wants to ensure that we are relevant when it comes to that. Two weeks ago, as I mentioned, I held some round tables for parents and workers and operators, and one of the concerns that educators brought forward was that many of them don't receive benefits. Despite the physical and demanding and high-contact nature of their work, a lot of them don't have benefits. According to the 2025-26 public accounts, \$3.3 million was spent on employee benefits. Yet, only \$3.2 million is estimated for employee benefits in the 2026-27 budget. That's on page 93.

So my question is to the minister—and I'm sure you value the workforce. We all do appreciate them, but appreciation comes with working conditions. I need to ask, with respect to the benefits that are being proposed now, with a cut—how does the minister balance explaining to the workers that they're valued and they're needed, yet this benefit cut is coming forth?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I'll just let you know that we actually did communicate directly with parents with respect to the CWELCC agreement. I think we were very clear on two occasions that without a significant additional investment from the federal government—CWELCC is a federal government program; it's not a province of Ontario program. Many of our supports come through JK and SK, all-day kindergarten, EarlyON centres—the supports to the CARE tax credit, and the supports for the lowest-income Ontarians so that they can access child care. As part of the agreement, there were additional resources, obviously, for wage support for workers in the system, and we've had some very good achievements on that.

The other thing you did highlight was with respect to space creation. You're right on that—two things you highlighted, I think you're right on.

The agreement allows us until March 31 to get the additional spaces online, which we will do.

The other thing I completely agree with you on—I think I was clear on this after the Auditor General—is that data collection from the ministry really is not what it needs to be. People are on multiple lists because they panic and they worry. So we have to make sure we do a better job of collecting data—but it also goes to our ability, then, to inform the federal government of what is happening on child care, and that causes some of the challenges that we have. There are funding resources in the agreement so that we can complete the IT transformation that I think is required and the additional work that needs to happen on—as I said the other day with Minister Hajdu—resourcing when it comes to staffing. It's not just in child care, at that level—it is our PSWs. There are a number of

different sectors that are requiring additional staffing, and often they're just not available to us.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: I appreciate your answer being somewhat concise.

Going back to the wait-list situation: Quite honestly, the parents I spoke to, and maybe the minister has heard—the commonality of it is that there's a lot of duplication, triplication, quadruplication, if those are even words. The Auditor General mentioned, on the wait-lists, that you didn't monitor, which is, again, very surprising—that we're not monitoring those things when there's a new program coming out with funding attached, as you mentioned, from the federal government. We're responsible for those funds, and we should be responsible for a program and a process that's actually transparent—that we're actually using those funds correctly and delivering those services.

The 2026-27 estimates include, on page 100, \$15.8 million for child care IT modernization. That's what I read there. I want to ask the minister, can we be assured that the money that's being spent on this IT modernization program has been sourced out correctly, has been background-checked, for lack of a better word, to ensure that they can do the job, meet the guidelines and eligibility—because this is a very important piece to the information or to grow the sector.

And I need to ask if there is a US contract in play, simply because there have been many of those through your government.

So I'll leave it at that for those answers, please.

Hon. Paul Calandra: For that, I'm going to ask Holly to come up.

Holly and her team deserve a tremendous amount of credit. The amount of work that she has been doing not only in the province but helping the federal government understand our situation has been second to none. So all of the credit for this extension really goes to Holly and her team and, frankly, to Minister Hajdu for recognizing the shortfalls in their system.

On the IT, I'll let Holly respond directly because I think you need a more specific answer than I'm probably able to give you.

1110

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Please state your name and your position.

Ms. Holly Moran: My name is Holly Moran. I'm the assistant deputy minister for the early years and child care division at the Ministry of Education.

Thank you for the question.

The IT system absolutely has been competitively procured at each stage of the way. From the alpha stage through the beta stage through the design stages, we've been working with competitively procured companies. We're currently working with Accenture on the next phase of the release. We will be starting our release in the fall, testing in the EarlyON system at first, to work the bugs out, make sure that everything is proper, until we go forward and launch the single authoritative portal for

parents so we can actually get an accurate measure of demand and simplify registration for children.

We're also including the Ontario education number assignment within the birth bundle at ServiceOntario. It seems logical to me that if you've got a baby and you've applied for a birth certificate, pretty soon you're going to be looking for child care, so that will also be simplified and reduce burden for parents going forward.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: Again, I'm not an expert in this, but I certainly think about process many times. The long-term-care wait-lists—is that a parallel kind of system that could be used, rather than creating a whole new system?

Ms. Holly Moran: I think the long-term-care wait-list is a bit of a challenging thing for some families. You come up to the top, you have your three choices, and if you don't take your three choices, you go back down to the bottom. In our consultations with parents over this new digital tool, that's not the way that they want the child care system to work. There are a lot of preferences for families, for different cultural or religious backgrounds, in terms of their child care needs. There are options for them in terms of what's closest to home, what's closest to work, and what's closest to the school where the other children in the family might be attending. So what we've heard overwhelmingly from parents is not to adopt that style of wait-listing.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: My only comment is that they've been doing it for such a long time and they're experts, so I hope people listen to what—

Ms. Holly Moran: Yes. Lots of lessons learned from all areas.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: The other thing I want to talk about is the departing from the commitment that you made in 2022 to lower fees to \$10 a day by March of this year. Recently, the four-year CWELCC extension only commits to \$19 a day, average, with a \$22-a-day cap until June 30, 2027. Parents have been asking at this point if, after June 30, 2027, they are going to see fees go up or down.

Hon. Paul Calandra: The agreement is reflective of the fact that although the province of Ontario has signed an agreement with the federal government, the minister does have to seek funding for the agreement through their budget process. If I'm not mistaken, their budget is in November, and then it has to go through its approval process. So the timeline is just reflective of what we anticipate will be the passage of a federal budget and then the additional funds.

With respect to the \$10-a-day, we've said to Minister Hajdu—this is a federal program; CWELCC is exclusively federal—that if they provide the funding for \$10-a-day, then we will ensure that our service providers and families get \$10-a-day. If they don't provide the funding for \$10-a-day, then they will—as they have—decide what the fees are going to be for families in the province of Ontario. So we are administering it on their behalf, using their funds, but at the same time, we want to be honest with families that this—again, I'm just going to say this: Minister Hajdu—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Hon. Paul Calandra: She recognized that there was a massive shortcoming in the program, and she deserves the credit for going back to her Prime Minister and her government and getting the additional funding that we have today.

Ms. Teresa J. Armstrong: I don't have the number here in front of me, but I know that the province has provided funding as a portion of the CWELCC program. I know it's a federal program, but sometimes there needs to be responsibility at different levels of government in order to make sure it's successful; otherwise, we're going to lose it. Other provinces seem to be making it work. So I hope in the future that there will be—if there isn't that opportunity, that we can step up and create those CWELCC programs to continue.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I'll say this: We administer it on behalf of the federal government. We do continue to provide resources for the lowest-income Ontarians to support them in the CWELCC program. We provide all-day JK and SK—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister. Now we'll go on to the third party. I recognize MPP Collard.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: All right, so we're going to pick up where we left off. I'm going to go back to my last questions about that directive, which you issued to all school boards, to stop reimbursing trustees for membership in trustee associations and for participation in professional development, education conferences and sector events, which I used to go to, which were really great ways to connect with the community.

Francophone trustees govern boards, boards that serve communities spread across enormous geographic territories. Their association has an important role to provide expertise and coordination that is particularly important in a minority-language environment.

Now, did your ministry conduct a specific analysis of the impact of these restrictions on the French-language school boards before imposing a province-wide policy designed without distinguishing between the very different governance responsibilities of English- and French-language boards?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Look, I'll say this: I think the funding and the resources that we send to school boards ought to be used to improve the educational experience for students and not the experience of trustees, full stop.

So if trustees want to have those additional fees for trustee associations, they can certainly pay for them, but I expect the money that we send for education should be spent on education and not conferences and other things that are outside of the mandate of a trustee.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Okay, right, but we have to evaluate that with that francophone lens that we keep trying to make the government understand the importance of.

There's another decision you made that actually puts into question your understanding of the francophone rights

to education, and that's about your proposed new trustee-compensation regulation.

Both the ACEPO and AFOCSC say—the Catholic and the public school boards associations—evaluate that the compensation for chairs will be reduced by approximately 40% and vice-chairs by approximately 28%.

Yet, they are still—according to your legislation—playing the same role, having the same job, exercising the same kind of governance.

If the responsibilities of French-language-board chairs have not decreased, why is your government proposing a formula that would reduce their compensation by as much as 43%?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Because, quite frankly, I think that the system should not be geared towards trustees. It should be geared towards students. And the role of a trustee—this reflects the traditional role of a trustee.

And look, I don't apologize for the fact that I want money to be spent on students and teachers and improving the system and not on school trustees. I'm sorry; we have a difference of opinion on that.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Okay. Thank you. I'm going to yield my time to MPP Fraser.

Mr. John Fraser: Well, you know, I don't want to go on on this, but I do want to make a comment with regard to what my colleague was just talking about. The minister's response in terms of money going towards education and the reasons that the role of trustees is being diminished and that they're not allowed professional development are that we want all the money to go there; we don't want people to waste money; we don't want people to buy milkshakes.

But we have a situation in government where cabinet ministers booked hotel rooms in downtown Toronto that they didn't need. Now, we didn't take over the cabinet, and we didn't put their ministries under supervision—at least, not that I know.

I just think schools—there are 5,000 schools in Ontario, two million students, 72 boards. Some of those are different boards because they service very specific populations.

And I think things like professional development and the ability to connect—because you know yourself too, Minister, you connect to other ministers around the world about education—are not frills but necessities, and it feels very punitive more than anything else. So I just want to say that I agree with my colleague. I don't think that that's right.

But I want to get into something else. We've had some discussion about the Staples contract. I don't want to go into the details of who can't get what, when and how much—the state that it's in. I have a detailed question, so you may need to ask somebody to come up. By what process was this contract procured—whether it was through you or Supply Ontario, I would like to know.

1120

Hon. Paul Calandra: Through Supply Ontario.

Mr. John Fraser: Do you grocery shop?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I do.

Mr. John Fraser: Me too. I was in the grocery business. I shop around. The thing that's really great about getting groceries is that there's competition—not as much as there used to be, but there's still competition, right? We cherry-pick. The grapes are \$1.99 a pound over there—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You aren't going to tell us about you being a grocery clerk—

Mr. John Fraser: No, I won't go into that.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank God.

Mr. John Fraser: What I'm trying to figure out is, if we're buying, why don't we have a competitive environment? Isn't that what we teach kids—free market, competition gets you lower prices, lower prices are better for all of us. But we've procured something where we have one vendor. I know there are lots of questions around it, but the principle of having only one vendor for 5,000 schools, two million students, I don't know how many thousand teachers—I don't know the number right off the top of my head; maybe you know, Minister.

Hon. Paul Calandra: It's over 61,000—

Mr. John Fraser: So 61,000 teachers—one vendor. That's not competition. That's not getting the best price. That may have been a broader government decision through Supply Ontario or through—can you comment on that?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Many school boards already have only one vendor.

What Supply Ontario looked for was who could provide the absolute best price on a catalogue of items that were identified by teachers. I think over 38,000 teachers responded to a survey to tell us what it is that they needed. Some 200 different items were identified. Who could provide the lowest price? But equally important to who could provide the lowest price was who could deliver to rural, remote, urban as well. So it wasn't just about one thing; it was about a whole host of other things.

What we weren't willing to do, and what the advice given to us was—we weren't willing to just give \$750 cash and say, "Go out and spend it the way you like." And teachers weren't asking for that, frankly. They were asking for something that was simple and easy that could be delivered to their school, that in many instances would piggyback on sole-source contracts that were already in existence across many of the boards of Ontario.

To my understanding, through Supply Ontario, the only one who was able to deliver was Staples. If I'm not mistaken, there were eight people who applied, and Staples was selected as the best vendor.

Mr. John Fraser: I guess the question is, why would you not have a vendor-of-record system where people qualify to be able to? Ontario is a big place—5,000 schools. Schools are different in school boards, and communities are different, from Thunder Bay to Ottawa to Windsor to Timiskaming. So it's symptomatic of the broader problem, which is that we think we can control the whole thing from an office building in downtown Toronto, or that one person can supply all this stuff. I think—

Hon. Paul Calandra: So your suggestion is that we would give them a credit card and that we would have receipts come in, as opposed to having one portal with

access to \$750, one vendor who can ensure the accountability of the resources. I'm just getting to the heart of it. You're telling me you would rather see a system where we provide a credit card, where teachers then have to provide receipts. Those receipts have to be made accountable—so they pay first or, alternately, they pay first and then we reimburse. I think that becomes a bit more difficult.

Toronto District School Board has had a Staples contract for years. Ottawa-Carleton has a Staples contract. So you're piggybacking onto existing contracts, in some instances. They provided the lowest price on a basket of goods identified by over 38,000 teachers. Some 61,000 teachers have access to the system and are able to deliver to every part of the province—rural, remote and urban.

Mr. John Fraser: Well, we've heard evidence to the contrary.

I'm just talking about the basic principle. I used to buy and sell produce. I would go to a warehouse and I would go to five or six different people to find out what the best price was for cherries or lettuce or oranges. I didn't make a sole-source deal with one supplier, because I knew—because there was no competition. If they knew I'm coming to you every day—

Hon. Paul Calandra: When the people went to your store to buy those supplies, were they buying just from your store, were they buying from the Ontario Food Terminal when they went to your store at the different prices that you had available to you? No, they were buying a sole source that you went to. The Ontario Food Terminal provided those.

Mr. John Fraser: Yes, but they could go to a store down the street.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One at a time, please.

Hon. Paul Calandra: The principle you're suggesting is completely different than what you were suggesting the province of Ontario should do.

Mr. John Fraser: No, what I'm suggesting is why would we not—I would like to know the process by which it was procured. I would like to know what the criteria were, and I would like to know how the selection went, because I just think, if the criterion was, "We're going to pick one," I don't think that that creates a competitive environment and therein lies the problem.

We're talking 60 million bucks on a \$43-billion budget. It's not even a rounding error on a rounding error on a rounding error. So if we don't actually have trust in the people who are teaching our kids and running the boards on such a small part of the budget and we're spending all this effort on this, obviously we can't see the forest from the trees. While we're focusing on \$60 million and no competition, boards aren't getting the \$800 million that they need to educate kids, special education kids.

The Auditor General: Her numbers are different because they're from a year before—in any event, between \$400 million and \$800 million. But we're messing around in something that, if we actually don't trust the people who educate our kids to do that, the people who are responsible on boards—you can't run everything from an office in downtown at Queen's Park. It just doesn't work that way.

Hon. Paul Calandra: It actually doesn't work that way as it is right now. What happens is that the boards are asked to onboard the teachers. The teachers themselves identified the fact that they didn't want to have to go out and spend money and then provide receipts. The board said a program like that would be very onerous for them because of the accounting that would result from that.

So the procurement process that we undertook was one that would be simplest and easiest, as identified by teachers and school boards, that made sure that teachers didn't have to spend their own money and they didn't have to provide receipts because that was automatically accounted for through the portal. The reason Staples was picked, I'm told through Supply Ontario, was because they provided the absolute lowest cost for the bundle of goods that teachers themselves—over 38,000 teachers—identified: over 200 products that they needed, that were the absolute lowest of cost and because they were able to deliver to every part of the province.

If the discussion is the fact that we're giving teachers access to \$750 that they didn't have access to before, I think we're in a pretty good spot, frankly.

Mr. John Fraser: We have Amazon. We have eBay. We have Shopify. We have Facebook Marketplace. We have all sorts of places where we can coordinate more than one vendor, even very small vendors. It's not an impossible thing to do. It's not an impossible thing to do, right?

Hon. Paul Calandra: How come you didn't do that as a grocer, then?

Mr. John Fraser: Pardon me?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Why didn't you do that as a grocer?

Mr. John Fraser: What would I do as a grocer? What I would do as a grocer is I would buy the goods that I have—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Well, why would you not offer multiple prices for your fruits and vegetables?

Mr. John Fraser: —I would select it—

Hon. Paul Calandra: It's no different. It's the same.

Mr. John Fraser: —from the supplier that I wanted to. I would put it at a price and when I had that price—

Hon. Paul Calandra: One price.

Mr. John Fraser: —I would know I have to be competitive with other people, otherwise they would walk down the street.

But what the ministry is saying, or what Supply Ontario is saying—in all deference to you because, ultimately, that's not your final decision—is, "You can't walk down the street. This is what you got, man: Take it or leave it." I don't know. I just don't think that that's the way to—

Hon. Paul Calandra: I guess we would have to disagree, because—

Mr. John Fraser: It surprises me, because when I look at the members across and yourself, it's like, "Free enterprise, competition"—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Mr. John Fraser: That's all? Just kidding.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): That's it.

It's now 50 seconds.

Mr. John Fraser: But competition—what are we doing?

Here's the thing, Minister: It's 60 million bucks on a \$43-billion budget. We know our class sizes are too big. We know that special education, I'll say—"short-changed" is too weak. Your word, "starved," is an extreme word, but \$800 million is a lot of money, and we're messing around in \$60 million.

Kind of what you're saying—and you may want to rephrase it—is, we can't trust the people on the ground to get it right.

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Hon. Paul Calandra: I actually think that's what your—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

We'll now go to the independent member. I recognize MPP Clancy.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I just want to start off by asking if you'll make a commitment. For the boards that have supervision right now, will you make a commitment to address the funding gaps, if that is really what is at the root cause of the deficits?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, we said that from day one.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I just want to make a comment that I think \$2,000 a day and \$350,000 a year for a part-time job is not a good use of taxpayer dollars.

I want to ask a little bit about child care. In my area, we're struggling with recruitment and retention. For example, they're making cuts at Conestoga College to the faculty, even though it's full, because of college funding. The Ministry of Labour has not prioritized child care for international students, so they leave the province and they go to other provinces to work. And I'm hearing from folks in the sector that there are record-low wages, so people could work there for 10 or 20 years and not see an increase to reflect their expertise and their experience, so we're losing people.

Will you make a commitment to working with these other ministries to address these recruitment and retention issues?

Hon. Paul Calandra: It's not only that; we have to actually work with the federal government on that. As you know, some of the international student changes that were unilaterally made by the federal government have had a direct impact on our ability to attract students to fill staffing gaps, not only in child care, but also in long-term care, in some of our hospitals and, actually, in our schools outside of the child care sector.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: You could make that a priority for the ONIP program, though.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Look, there are so many challenges, so many labour areas where we are requiring people. That is one of the challenges that we faced when the federal government made a unilateral decision to reduce. It wasn't only just the financial challenges that our colleges and universities faced, but it was an immediate challenge in workforces across the province, something that I know that we will continue to work on.

I know on child care, we have made some significant progress on the wage floor, and not only on that, but on bringing new centres online. We'll meet our targets, as highlighted in the new agreement that we have. Ultimately, we are going to continue to work with the federal government to make sure we have a good, stable system and that we can undertake the delivery of its CWELCC program.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: One area of concern is transportation. A lot of folks, with the high cost of diesel, are questioning the amount that they are compensated for fuel charges. A lot of urban areas would like to see more flexibility so that students who require a bus pass could use public transportation to access school. I think we're missing out. We are spending zero dollars on kids who bike and walk to school, so we're seeing kids not wearing helmets, using roads unsafely, and with the removal of bike lanes, it puts more and more kids into our emergency rooms for brain injuries.

What are you going to do to address the mishmash of transportation policies that leave more and more families either vulnerable, at risk or without options? Because there was a record number of complaints to the Ombudsman last year related to transportation.

Hon. Paul Calandra: There's an automatic escalator that goes in place when fuel prices escalate, as we've seen, so the transportation—there is agreement there that when prices go over a certain level, additional funds are given to the operators to cover the cost of the escalated fuel price.

With respect to kids wearing helmets or not wearing helmets, that's parental responsibility and there is legislation in place that a child under 18 has to wear a helmet.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: You don't think education has a part to play?

Hon. Paul Calandra: In what sense?

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: In helping kids learn how to learn the road safely? Like, we spend zero dollars—

Hon. Paul Calandra: But that happens every day in school. That's just part of the educational system, right?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: It doesn't—

Hon. Paul Calandra: As far as the distance travelling, there is a provincial standard with respect to the distance that separates you from the school and whether you would have access to student transportation or not. So there is a provincial standard that is already in place for that.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I'm just letting you know that the formula is really old and the way that we fund transportation is a bit archaic. We are providing zero dollars, again, to anybody who wants to use transit, bike or walk to school. We could be having a healthier community. We have the cancer society trying to do work on this because your ministry is not. They're creating walking school buses because it reduces the rates of cancer.

We do have a role to play as an education system to make sure kids have access to education on how they can use the road safely when they're walking, biking or using transit. And more—

Hon. Paul Calandra: I think teachers do that every day. And look, honestly, come on. Teachers are doing that from kindergarten on. They're teaching kids—

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: That is not the case.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

We will now go to the government side, and I'll recognize MPP Leardi.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Minister, I have a question about practical skills. We know that children graduating in our system, when they graduate out of high school, they'll graduate with certain academic credentials. I want to hear you talk about whether or not you think that students graduating out of high school should graduate also with certain practical skills, whether those practical skills will be applicable to whatever they choose to do in life, whether they go on to open a business, or whether they go into the workforce, or college or university or apprenticeship—whatever they choose to do. What practical skills are we going to be training them for, and what is your ministry doing to make sure that students graduating out of our high schools get practical skills that are applicable in real life?

Hon. Paul Calandra: That's a really good question. As I said in my opening remarks, it doesn't matter if you're going to college, university, if you're going to go into an apprenticeship or you're just deciding to go into the workforce, the K-to-12 system has to prepare you for wherever that path leads you in life.

One of the interesting changes over the last number of years has been the focus on the trades and the apprenticeships. You can now earn apprenticeship credits through your high school experience, which has been very, very popular. Specialist High Skills Major programming is very, very, very popular—co-op, the dual credit system, which puts high school kids into the college system so that they can gain better access to the trades or the jobs that they want to pursue in the future.

The Level Up! career fairs—I don't know if you've had an opportunity to ever go to one of these. Admittedly, I went to my first last year. It was not at all what I expected. It was absolutely incredible, working with our tradespeople to go into a school environment and see them teaching kids how to lay bricks, brick layers—and not only that, but the amazing equipment that is used to identify pipes underground and fix—they're just absolutely amazing.

So it's exposing kids to other things through the education system, but it is also preparing them through the curriculum that we are providing so that they are prepared for what the jobs are tomorrow or what it is that they want to do. That is why we've taken a look at many of the—financial literacy: we've improved the financial literacy curriculum. Why? Because it's just foundational to whatever path you want to take. The moment you leave, you should be able to understand how to budget, a mortgage.

The standardized testing that we do through the EQAO helps identify areas where we have shortcomings so that we can address those really quickly, but it is about the system being able to move quickly. And that's the other thing that we are finding: The changes that we're making

are also allowing the system to move much more quickly than we would have been in the past. MPP Firin talked about this. It doesn't take long to destroy something. It often takes a long time to rebuild something. And when the system itself is built on a foundation that should take time and time and time and time, you will never do that.

So when you look at the speed at which we've brought in the different apprenticeship programs, the Level Up! career fairs, the SHSM program, the dual credits, working with our union partners, working with our colleges and universities to say, "Expose some of our kids to some of the programs that you have"—these are all ways in which you're helping prepare kids for the future.

And again—I know it's not specifically what you're asking—I don't want to downplay the importance of showing up. I don't want to downplay that. Attendance matters. Participation matters. And it is all a foundation that helps prepare our kids for exactly what they are going to face when they leave this place.

Mr. Fraser talked about supplying his grocery store. He could only supply a grocery store if he showed up, right? He could only understand what the best way or the most affordable way was if he knew how to do that. And the system that we are creating is all about making students, no matter what their level, no matter what it is that they want to accomplish—when they leave grade 12, they should be prepared and ready to succeed in whatever environment it is that they choose to start the next phase of their life.

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Mr. Anthony Leardi: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Firin.

MPP Mohamed Firin: Minister, thank you. My question is about—I think you touched on it a little bit—financial literacy. Don't worry; I'm not going to take you through the grocery store and talk to you about the prices of cherries and lettuce today.

Minister, my generation did not have the privilege of understanding financial literacy. Me and most of my friends did not get that opportunity. Unfortunately, we learned in a later part of life, when we should have had that opportunity early on.

This is the first school year with a new financial literacy graduation requirement. Why did the government believe financial literacy needs to become a formal part of learning and earning an Ontario secondary diploma?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Again, this is one of those areas, like attendance and participation—really, it was the teachers who spearheaded that. Financial literacy really came from parents and educators, who said, "Listen, we've got a real problem here. We can help kids with the foundational parts of two plus two is four, but if they don't have the life skills they need that are so important, then we're failing them."

Really, that initiative of financial literacy and the importance that we're putting on it came from parents themselves—and a lot of students, frankly, who when they left the K-to-12 system and then were faced with going to a

bank and getting a mortgage or faced with, “Oh, now, I’m renting an apartment. I’ve got to pay some bills. I have to balance a budget”—many students themselves reflected and said with frustration, “Why did we not learn this? With all of the things we have to learn, why is this not something that was required?”

That is, again, an example of government moving quickly, identifying the problem and making the change and, ultimately, send to parents, students and teachers to deliver on something that is just foundational to every single aspect of the rest of your life, frankly.

MPP Mohamed Firin: Growing up in the part of the city where I grew up, a lot of single parents did not have the opportunity to teach kids financial literacy. A lot of parents worked double jobs. Yes, it is typically the parents that should be—but a lot of parents did not have the opportunity. So I do thank you and your ministry for putting that forward, because that lifts that burden off some of the parents today, and it gives a lot of, especially marginalized, communities the opportunity to get financial literacy. I think it’s very important, especially for their future and education.

Minister, switching gears, Ontario and the federal government announced a four-year extension of the Canada-wide child care agreement this week. Can you explain what that agreement means for Ontario families?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, and frankly, they keep saying—this a federal program, full stop. It is not an Ontario program. Minister Hajdu, the federal minister responsible for the program, deserves the credit for understanding that the program that they brought to Ontario was significantly underfunded. We wanted to be very open and transparent to the families that were in this federal program, that without additional funding, we could not maintain the federal program.

What this new agreement allows us to do is maintain rates at \$19 for families—I think it’s a cap of \$22 but an average of \$19—at least until the end of June. That is only as a result of the fact that there’s a federal budget that has to go through. I’m highly confident that once their budget is passed, the rest of the funding will materialize as promised in the agreement. I don’t think she would have signed an agreement if she didn’t anticipate the funding coming forward.

It also provides stability for a number of years going forward and continues to allow the province of Ontario to focus on what its priorities were: all-day JK and SK for our families, the early Ontario, the CARE tax credit. So it complements what we’re doing very nicely.

There is still more work that has to be done on our part. As mentioned by MPP Armstrong, we have to do better on data, and we are doing that. And we have to make sure that we hit our targets of the over 80,000; we’re close, but we have some more targets to bring online.

I will say this, though: I think it’s important to note that in this agreement, the federal government is not expanding access to it, so once we hit their target of 81,000, there are no additional funds to expand the CWELCC system through this agreement. So the federal government has

frozen us at that level. I think, then, the real challenge going forward is, where are we going to see reductions, either reductions to offset some of this—and we’re seeing that in some of the discussion right now around transfers for mental health and addictions from the federal government. So we’re concerned about that.

But in this instance, full credit goes to Minister Hajdu. She saw the problem, she identified it, she listened to the province of Ontario, and she came through with the additional resources that were needed to maintain the program.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Pierre.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: I’m going to continue with a couple of questions about the federal funding model for child care.

Can you tell us, at a high level, what changed as a result of this week’s agreement? And are there any outstanding issues that still need to be resolved?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Yes, there definitely are some outstanding issues that we’ve agreed to continue to work on over the life of the program. We have to ensure that the additional resources that we get are—what will the funding be? We have an agreement that there’s at least going to be a floor of \$19 for now. There are some other issues that Holly and her team are going to have to work on.

I said at the news conference that as a minister, you love to be able to take credit for stuff, but in this instance, no credit is deserving of this minister. Holly and her team literally led national discussions on the challenges and the shortcomings of the program, the way the federal government undertook it. The federal government listened. The federal minister listened. She understood the challenges. They respected that it was their program that we are administering on their behalf, and they made the changes. So this allows, at least, certainty for our providers. It allows the ministry to work with the federal government to ensure that we get the spaces we need and over the time frame—again, addressing what MPP Armstrong talked about and, I think, MPP Clancy, is staffing. You have to balance space creation with your ability to staff the spaces created. The federal government recognized that.

Again, just to reiterate: On the data side, concluding an IT transformation that will allow us to better identify who needs what, where they need to be, and remove these multiples of people—which parents do, not because they want to be troublesome, but they’re desperate to get access, so they put themselves on multiple lists. As a province, we should have a better idea of who’s on what lists, working with our service providers.

It’s very unique—and the last thing I’ll say on this; I promise. This was a huge program in a short period of time. This was a multi-billion-dollar national child care program. The federal government was providing resources and then said to the provinces, “You have to administer it on our behalf.” And the provinces and territories did that. Credit to the federal government for allowing us to do it. But the speed at which this was done—and some of the challenges that we faced were small in nature compared to the benefit that it gave to parents, and the co-operation that you saw between the federal and provincial governments.

Again, not to belabour it, but huge, huge kudos to the federal minister, who I'm sure had a challenging time going back to her Treasury Board and asking for \$12.8 billion or \$12 billion in additional funding to support their program. She did it, and we will administer it on their behalf through our service providers.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: We know it's a federal program. We know that kind of dominates the conversation and the discussion. But can you talk about the investments that Ontario makes of its own for child care and early learning—and maybe speak, too, a bit about the investments from the province of Ontario.

Hon. Paul Calandra: For a number of years, Ontario had made the decision that it was going to focus on all-day JK and SK. A lot of the provinces aren't on that path.

We have, as I said, the EarlyON centres in almost every community across the province.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Hon. Paul Calandra: We have the CARE tax credit, which helps support families to offset the cost of child care.

And then, of course, we have always provided supports for low-income families who needed access to child care.

Of course, we provide capital assistance to bring on new centres. And when you look at where a lot of the new child cares are happening—look, as I said, the capital round, we introduced 1,900 additional spaces in schools across the province of Ontario, building on the 1,300 spaces. More often than not, you see these spaces coming online in our schools.

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And, of course, with the Liam Riazati fund, we've announced some safety additions as well.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

We'll now go to the official opposition for 10 minutes and 54 seconds. I recognize MPP Pasma.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Minister, I want to start by just remarking on the fact that you just spoke about how important it is to be in attendance, whether it's school or whether it's work, but we are still on the 21-week vacation that your government decided to take over the summer. If your government allows us to sit fully to the end of the fall session then we are only going to sit 13 weeks this year, which is only half the amount of time that we're actually supposed to be here. So I think it's disturbing, when we're talking about work being representing the people of Ontario, that we are not being allowed to show up at that job.

But I don't have much time left, so I'm just going to move on to student transportation.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I mean, given that you're in a committee right now, it's kind of on an odd statement, but go ahead.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Three years ago, one of your predecessors broke the student transportation funding formula in pretty spectacular fashion. That resulted in 7,000 students in Ottawa experiencing incredible disruption. Two years ago, it was 14,000 students in Renfrew

county, when the buses didn't run for eight weeks because the funding formula doesn't actually cover the real costs of student transportation.

Now, this year, you intervened in unprecedented fashion in contract negotiations with six transportation consortia, which actually led to negotiations breaking down just as they were on the verge of reaching agreements with these operators. That put transportation for 55,000 students at risk. Contracts ended up being signed just days before the school year began. That was putting in jeopardy students' ability to even attend school and making it harder for operators to have equipment in place and safetied and bus drivers in place.

The bus operators are private businesses, and they've seen incredible cost inflation in the past few years. The cost of a bus is up 71% since 2021; the cost of parts, 50%; labour, 25%; fuel, 40%; insurance, 30%. Yet when you intervened in this unprecedented way, what you told the boards they had to offer these operators was 0%. Now, I don't know how you expected that operators were going to agree to take a 0% contract when these are what their costs are increasing by. But in the end, these contracts were only signed days before the school year began because you told boards that they could spend up to 20% more on signing contracts but that you wouldn't pay for it. So the funding that was used to actually achieve these contracts is now coming out of other parts of education funding.

All of that begs the question: When you say that it's results that matter and every single available dollar should be going into student achievement and in classrooms, why are you not funding student transportation based on the actual cost of providing it when you know that the end result of not doing that is always going to be money coming out of classrooms?

Hon. Paul Calandra: Almost everything you said there was incorrect, so I'm not exactly sure where to begin.

If you're asking me, do we want to make sure that the contracts that the consortia—as you know, consortia were brought in to negotiate school busing contracts for boards in their consortia area. We allow them to do that. The ministry asking to ensure that those contracts are fair I don't think is a challenge.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Minister, you didn't allow them to do that; you required them to do that.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One at a time, please.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: That is a requirement of your government—implemented by the Liberals, maintained by your government—that transportation has to be procured through these transportation consortia, which involve more than one school board. This is not a choice boards are making; this is a choice that you are directing them to do. So you can't turn around and blame the boards for this scenario—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Oh, I'm not at all. If you actually let an answer happen, then—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: —when it is your government that's requiring them.

And what part of this are you saying is incorrect? Are you saying that the contracts weren't signed days before the school year began? Are you saying you didn't tell these boards that their contracts had to be 0% when you when you intervened in the negotiations?

Hon. Paul Calandra: I'm just making sure you're finished.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm sorry—was that a yes or a no?

Hon. Paul Calandra: No, I'm just making sure you're finished your question so that we can answer it. So, we consistently—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Okay. Are you saying, yes, that is incorrect? Or are you saying, no, that's not correct? You didn't tell them that they could only have a 0% increase?

Hon. Paul Calandra: The ministry consistently and always asks the consortium when they are doing—either they're going to do an RFP or they're not going to do an RFP. We will always manage.

Now, I don't know what kind of ministry you would run, but I want to know what expenses I might be facing going forward. It's not just a blank cheque. So, yes, do I look at what the costs are or what the expected costs of busing might be? I do, 100%.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Well, Minister, I can tell you—

Hon. Paul Calandra: I would expect that since you're drilling me for estimates, you would expect that. But I think the really important part of this is that you said—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm going to reclaim my time, Chair, because we are no longer answering the question that I asked—

Hon. Paul Calandra: —that there was no student that was left without busing—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Excuse me, Minister—

Hon. Paul Calandra: —when school resumes in September.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Excuse me.

Hon. Paul Calandra: And I think that was a very good opportunity—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I am reclaiming my time, Chair. And I can tell you—

Hon. Paul Calandra: —and I think it was a success.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister. MPP Pasma, go ahead.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I can tell you that when I am Minister of Education in a couple years, I will run a very different Ministry of Education than you will—

Hon. Paul Calandra: God forbid. We've been down that path before.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I will actually fund the proper costs of education so that our kids get the supports that they need, and they have the caring adults around them that they need, and they'll be able to get to school because there is actually funding for student transportation.

And yes, there were RFP issues. Nobody submitted proposals because you weren't actually providing the funding that was required. This is how we ended up being in a scenario—

Hon. Paul Calandra: And yet, there were no delays in busing across the province of Ontario.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: —where 55,000 students almost had their student transportation not be in place in the first day of school.

Hon. Paul Calandra: Almost. The important point is “almost,” right?

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Well, do you know what? Buses aren't procured from one day to the next, so I don't think “almost” is good enough in this scenario. Now, just because—

Hon. Paul Calandra: So every child in this province in Ontario received busing on the first day—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I didn't ask a question, Minister. I didn't ask you a question there.

Hon. Paul Calandra: I think that is a really good indication of how well we did.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm going to move on to a question—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One at a time, please.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: We know that mental health among students is in crisis. Nine out of 10 principals say they need more help than what they're getting for mental health. Only one in 10 schools in Ontario has regularly scheduled access to a mental health professional and almost half have none at all.

And this is even more important that we provide mental health support when you're going to tie attendance to grades. We should be doing everything we can to support student mental health and everything we can to make sure that kids can actually be in the classroom.

But instead, this year's per-student funding isn't increasing a penny. It's not even an increase that falls short of the rate of inflation; there's no increase. So instead of doing something to address all of these unmet needs that principals and teachers and education workers are identifying, we're going to make it harder to even provide the same level of support that we're providing now. And what's more, 25% of the funding that you provide for mental health doesn't even go into schools.

So why aren't you increasing funding when our kids' need for support with mental health is greater than ever?

Hon. Paul Calandra: So enrolment is significantly reduced across the province of Ontario, and funding has remained the same.

At the same time, as I said earlier, I am quite concerned with a potential multi-billion-dollar cut to the transfer payment on mental health and addictions that is being potentially put on the table by the federal government. That will have a significant impact on funding. So we're going to have to take a look at that when that comes forward.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: So are you saying the funding that's going into schools is federal funding?

Hon. Paul Calandra: A portion, of course is absolutely. We work together on the health and social transfers of the federal government and the province, of course.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: So if the federal government is decreasing money for mental health and you recognize

that mental health is important, why wouldn't you increase your funding to replace what the feds are decreasing? Do you not think student mental health is important, especially if you're going to say kids have to be in school?

It doesn't really matter what the federal Liberals are doing. What matters is—

Hon. Paul Calandra: Well, again, MPP Pasma, the federal government has—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: —our responsibility to kids in the province of Ontario.

Hon. Paul Calandra: The federal government has indicated that they will be potentially reducing transfers. So as I said, I'm concerned about that potential multi-billion-dollar cut. Enrolment in our schools has decreased, but funding has remained stable, which means that there is actually an increase in funding for those students that are currently in the system.

We have multiple ministries that work on child and mental health issues. It's not just the Ministry of Education, as you know. It is the children, community and social services, it is the Ministry of Health in co-operation with the Ministry of Education.

When speaking to principals and when speaking to teachers, one of the things that they highlighted to me was that if we can get more kids in the school on a daily basis, then we'll have better opportunity to address some of the challenges that they face—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: But you're not helping them do that.

Hon. Paul Calandra: —and that is why we made some of the attendance changes that we've made.

So, look, there are a lot of good things that are happening in the school system across the province of Ontario. The EQAO results show steady improvement, and—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: I'm going to reclaim my time, Chair, because we're no longer talking about mental health.

Minister, you're not helping kids be there; you are just punishing them for failing, and it's clear that teachers and principals and education workers are desperate for additional support. Enrolment has not declined under your government; it has increased. And yet you're failing to actually fill this unmet need for students, even though we know that students are saying that they need help.

I spoke to workers at a school in southern Ontario: 1,000 students; one mental health professional. So it's not even a case where kids aren't getting the mental health support that they need, but even to identify that they need mental health support, they have to take a number and they don't get to talk to somebody that day. When our kids are brave enough to come forward and say that they need mental health support, that mental health support should be there, especially if we're going to punish kids for not having good enough mental health to be in school, when we know that punishing them in that way—

Hon. Paul Calandra: You know that's not true. You know that's not true.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: —actually makes their mental health worse.

Hon. Paul Calandra: You know that that is absolutely—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: It is 100% true.

Hon. Paul Calandra: It is absolutely wrong. You know it to be wrong.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: It is 100% true.

Hon. Paul Calandra: You absolutely know that to be wrong, and that is part of the big problem that we have in education when it comes to ideological thinking like that.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: We need to listen to teachers and education workers and principals.

Hon. Paul Calandra: What you do is telling people something that is absolutely a bold-faced lie.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: We need to listen to the experts who work in our schools every single day.

Hon. Paul Calandra: It is absolutely not true.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Chair, that's unparliamentary.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you very much. This concludes the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Education.

Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates. Are members ready to vote?

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Yes, you can. Thank you, Minister.

Shall vote—

Ms. Chandra Pasma: Recorded votes, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Sure.

Ms. Chandra Pasma: All of them, yes.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Shall vote 1001, ministry administration program, carry?

Ayes

Firin, Jordan, Leardi, Pang, Pierre, Racinsky.

Nays

Armstrong, Clancy, Pasma.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Carried.

Shall vote 1002, elementary and secondary education program, carry?

Ayes

Firin, Jordan, Leardi, Pang, Pierre, Racinsky.

Nays

Armstrong, Clancy, Pasma.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): The motion is carried.

Shall vote 1004, child care and early year programs, carry?

Ayes

Firin, Jordan, Leardi, Pang, Pierre, Racinsky.

Nays

Armstrong, Clancy, Pasma.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Carried.

Shall the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of Education carry?

Ayes

Firin, Jordan, Leardi, Pang, Pierre, Racinsky.

Nays

Armstrong, Clancy, Pasma.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): The motion is carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of Education to the House?

Ayes

Clancy, Firin, Jordan, Leardi, Pang, Pierre, Racinsky.

Nays

Armstrong, Pasma.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Carried.

That concludes the committee's consideration of the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of Education.

This committee now stands in recess until 1 o'clock.

The committee recessed from 1203 to 1300.

MINISTRY OF LONG-TERM CARE

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Good afternoon, everyone. The Standing Committee on Social Policy will now come to order. We're meeting to consider the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of Long-Term Care for a total of two hours.

From the ministry, we are joined by the Honourable Natalia Kusendova-Bashta, Minister of Long-Term Care; ministry officials and staff. As a reminder, the ministry is required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues that the ministry undertakes to address.

Are there any questions from the members before we start?

I am now required to call vote 1401, which sets the review process in motion. We will begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from the Minister of Long-Term Care.

Minister, the floor is yours—and you're looking very radiant today.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Thank you so much.

Good afternoon, everyone, colleagues. Thank you for inviting me to present the 2026-27 Ministry of Long-Term Care estimates. I'm very grateful to our deputy minister, Peter Kaftarian, and the entire team—looking very sharp today—for joining me.

It is my privilege and honour to serve as the Minister of Long-Term Care for our great province. I say "privilege" because as a nurse, the role of the Minister of Long-Term Care gives me an opportunity to use my training, experience, skills and expertise to improve the care Ontarians receive.

It has now been two full years that I have served in this role, and I can tell you that I have spent this time very wisely, keeping a busy schedule:

- touring our great province;

- visiting homes;

- speaking with residents, families, staff, administrators, experts and our sector associations;

- speaking to many of you who also brought forward your issues, worries and ideas;

- critically thinking and problem-solving some very complex system issues and, at the very same time, some very real individual life circumstances and problems faced by our residents or those waiting on our waiting lists;

- hosting countless podium announcements across the province with many of you and other members, bringing good news and funding to your communities;

- reading correspondence and letters that were penned to me, sometimes by hand, by our residents that told me stories of their lives, of their experiences, of what it is like to live in long-term care—stories of joy and gratitude but also sometimes of loss and heartbreak;

- attending conferences and speaking with academics, experts and thought leaders to explore new ways of doing things and continually improving our system; and

- analyzing budgets and really thinking through every single financial decision that I sign, because I know that behind every one of those dollar signs are real people whose lives I am impacting by a simple stroke of a pen.

But most of all, I have spent time learning. Not a day goes by that I am not learning something new about our system; our people; the way we do business; the way long-term care coexists in the broader health care system; the needs, priorities and dreams—yes, dreams—of our residents, whose families entrusted me with their care; and the political work and buy-in I have to accomplish within an established political system to accomplish my mission and vision for this ministry, and especially to get these priorities funded.

After two years of diligent work, passion and real commitment to improving our system, I can tell you that the days are long but the years are short. The stories can make you cry. The joy and life of people who experience long-term care is very real.

But the people who choose long-term care as a vocation are the very best of what Ontario has to offer. I truly couldn't be prouder of the work of my ministry and all of our front-line health care staff. I call them "long-term carers" because they truly care. I am so proud to be standing at the

helm of a ministry who leads over 120,000 dedicated, compassionate and caring staff who wake up at the crack of dawn every single morning, put on their uniform and go in to serve over 80,000 of the most vulnerable people in our province. Our people are, without a question, our biggest asset.

This work is not easy. This work can feel undervalued at times. This work can get messy, emotional and sad. But this work that they do requires real heart and real humanity to meet our residents in whatever moment they are having, whatever that moment requires—to enter into real therapeutic relationships, putting their own selves aside and focusing fully, presently and compassionately on the needs of another human being. That’s something that simply cannot be taught, and I can tell you, without any doubt, that those who choose long-term care as a vocation choose a path of service, of giving back, of personal growth, lifelong learning and, yes, sacrifice.

I know that our incredible nurses, PSWs and allied health professionals bring the stories of our residents home. They don’t simply sign off when their shift is finished; they worry about them when they are off for the weekend or for holidays. I know because they tell me. They worry if that resident has eaten today. They worry if they were able to get up and participate in the activity. They worry if that long-awaited family visit happened or not. And they worry if that specialized piece of equipment arrived on time.

In nursing school, I learned about Jean Watson’s Theory of Human Caring. This theory centres on the moral commitment to preserve human dignity and the inner life worlds of both patients and nurses. The core concept of transpersonal caring is a heart-centred, deep connection between the caregiver and recipient that goes beyond the ego and touches spiritual dimensions during a caring occasion, which is the pivotal moment when the nurse and patient come together in such a way that a human-to-human transaction can occur. I can tell you that I see this concept and this theory come to life every single time I visit one of our long-term-care homes.

Some of the clinical care tasks or caring processes, as described by Watson, require the carer to practise love and kindness; be authentically present; create a healing environment; assist with basic needs; develop a helping trust; be present and supportive; and be open to spiritual and unknown mysteries of life and death.

Again, I see these principles come to life when I am walking through our long-term-care homes and simply observing the life, joy and activities that are happening. So to our incredible long-term-care staff: Thank you for everything you do. Thank you for choosing long-term care. Thank you for being authentically and unapologetically you.

Now let’s talk about some of the system transformation that we have accomplished and some of the policy work currently taking place.

As many of you know, back in 2021, our government introduced our plan to fix long-term care. While we have updated and modified this plan as the world around us has

evolved, our focus on improving long-term care, on improving the resident experience, on putting Ontarians first, has not changed. Our plan has four key areas: They are building homes; funding services and operations; increasing staffing; and improving accountability, enforcement and transparency.

For years, Canadian statisticians have highlighted the shifting demographics of our populations. We see it in our communities. In response, our government launched the most ambitious long-term-care home building and re-development plan in Canada, while ensuring homes have the staff needed to deliver high-quality care. By redeveloping and upgrading existing beds—or homes, as we call them—we are increasing the capacity of the entire system, which, in turn, helps reduce patient care wait times, wait-lists and assists in alleviating hospital and emergency department pressures. I am pleased to say that we’ve made remarkable progress on this plan.

But my ministry also recognizes that one of the greatest challenges to building long-term-care homes is the cost, and we continue to work hard to address that. To help with this, our government has introduced a range of programs, services and policies to help offset rising construction costs and support long-term-care operators in building homes where they’re needed the most.

One key program we introduced was the construction funding subsidy. This program was created in direct response to escalating construction costs and the challenges many long-term-care projects faced when moving into the construction phase. Thanks to the support from the CFS and the subsequent CFS top-up, my ministry helped advance the construction of 103 long-term-care projects between November 2022 and the end of May 2025.

We also understand that different types of long-term-care operators require different types of supports. Non-profit operators have historically had more difficulty with fundraising and getting shovels in the ground than for-profit operators, especially in hard-to-build regions of the province, which is why our government created programs and policies to help address this, programs like the Building Ontario Fund. We also introduced the Not-For-Profit Loan Guarantee Program, which helps incentivize non-profit operators to build more homes by accessing financials through Infrastructure Ontario and the Building Ontario Fund.

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While these programs have helped advance the construction of more than 100 new long-term-care homes and tens of thousands of new and upgraded beds, we also listened to sector feedback on how we could help even further. This feedback led to the creation of the capital funding program, which I proudly announced last year to better promote future long-term-care development. It does this by providing stronger supports for long-term-care operators as they face rising costs, whether that’s due to construction, labour, materials or other development-associated pressures.

The capital funding program provides long-term-care homes with increased ministry funding, funding that is

equivalent to a maximum of 85%—that's 85%—of total eligible costs, with that maximum being determined by the home's geographic location.

The program consists of three funding components that are structured to reflect a more targeted and equitable approach based on the type of operator, which helps address the specific needs of not-for-profit and Indigenous operators.

Moreover, homes benefiting from the capital funding program will receive funds earlier in the construction process, including the potential for an operator to receive the entire funding amount during their construction period.

As a result, I'm proud to report that as of July 2026, 165 long-term-care projects, representing nearly 27,000 new and redeveloped beds, have either been completed, are currently under construction or have received ministry approval to begin construction across the province.

As I stated earlier, Ontario's population is rapidly aging, and one of the things that Ontarians have made clear is that they want to age in place—to live at home for as long as possible. In response to this, our government expanded access to the services and programs people want and need to bring these supports directly to them.

To this end, last September, I announced the launch of a new pilot program designed to help Ontarians still living at home access certain types of long-term-care supports. I'm very, very proud, actually, of this program. It's called the Community Access to Long-Term Care program, or CALTC.

Some homes already offer social and recreational programming to the people in the community. CALTC provides additional services and clinical care to help Ontarians age safely at home longer. These services may include, but are not limited to, clinical and personal care, nursing supports, and dementia and wound care.

Really, the vision for this program is to make sure that we open up our long-term-care homes, to invite the community in so that the seniors that live in the community can come in and visit and have some of their clinical needs met. And shall the time come that they may need to actually move into long-term care, they're already familiar with the setting, they're familiar with the staff, and it is a much easier transition. So we really want to open up our long-term-care homes so that we can have the community come in and we can build that community of seniors really anchored in our long-term-care homes.

Now we are entering the second year, and the CALTC pilot is currently offered at six homes:

- the Seniors Health and Wellness Village at Peel Manor in Brampton;
- Partners Community Health at Wellbrook Place in Mississauga;
- St. Joseph's Villa in Dundas;
- the Four Seasons Lodge in Deep River;
- Woodingford Lodge in Woodstock; and
- Craigholme in Ailsa Craig.

But when an individual's health needs become more complex and they require more care than can be reasonably provided in the community, we've also introduced

pilot programs and services in long-term-care homes to support those needs.

One such program is the local priorities fund. First launched in 2022, the local priorities fund provides specialized equipment, services and staff training to enable long-term-care homes to admit new residents with specialized needs and to support current residents with complex problems.

In 2025-26, the local priorities fund supported over 1,100 projects across Ontario. I'll just name some quick examples:

- dementia care unit equipment, such as interactive murals and de-escalation tools;
- specialized wound care equipment;
- diagnostic and specialized equipment to help reduce emergency department visits;
- a mental health and substance use model through deeper mental health assessments and staff education training.

Those are just some examples.

What we do is we really allow the homes to apply for this fund. We're very flexible, because the homes know what their residents need. So they tell us what they need and then we fund them.

Another program aimed at improving the services and complex care long-term-care residents need is the province's behavioural specialized units, or BSUs. BSUs provide long-term-care residents with complex care needs like dementia or other behavioural conditions with safe, quality care in the comfort of a long-term-care home instead of a hospital. We have invested \$46 million over three years, beginning in 2024-25 to support BSUs; 65 additional beds were created in 2024-25; and, in 2025-26, the ministry approved an additional 153 new BSU beds.

To further strengthen care for Ontarians with complex and responsive behavioural needs, Behavioural Supports Ontario provides specialized and enhanced supports across the system. Through a \$95-million investment, BSO provides specialized staffing, supports and services for all older adults who have or are at risk for responsive behaviours associated with dementia, complex mental health, substance use and other neurological conditions.

And so, when I visit my homes, I always ask about their BSO leads. They're such an integral part of our workforce. There are different models that exist across the province, but we know without a doubt that every single home in Ontario has residents that require this specialized care. We'll be building on that because we know the need is only growing and BSO has become such a paramount tool and resource for our long-term-care homes to really support those specialized behavioural needs.

What's the time, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Four minutes and 32 seconds.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Okay. I've got lots more to say, but why don't we move forward a little bit.

I also recently announced the Improving Dementia Care Program, which is a \$9-million investment over three years to support up to 45 long-term-care homes in imple-

menting emotion-based models of care and improving outcomes for residents with dementia. The IDCP supports long-term-care homes to implement emotion-based models of care including staff training, which is very, very important. Emotion-based models of care are designed to better support residents with dementia and dementia-related behaviours by prioritizing their individual needs, fostering close relationships between staff, residents and families, and promoting dignity and respect.

In February of this year, I announced the first 17 homes participating in year 1 of the IDCP and we certainly will have more announced in the near future. We've also announced a cultural pilot because we are so proud of the close to 70 cultural homes that we have across our province. I always say that cultural homes are like the jewels in my crown because I think we are so unique and so special in Ontario that we are able to have these cultural homes tailored to the cultural needs of our residents. Whether that's Polish, Jewish, Italian, Muslim, these homes respond to the very real needs of our residents. We know that when people age, oftentimes they revert to their primary language, even if they spoke English in the past. And we know that residents have much better outcomes when they can fully express their needs in the language of their choice.

So the cultural pilot that we introduced was a designation-based placement model that prioritizes the religious, ethnic or linguistic preferences of crisis applicants or their spouse or partner on the waiting list for long-term-care homes that primarily serve those preferences. The goal of testing the model was twofold: Firstly, to evaluate how changes to long-term-care wait-list prioritization can help improve access to those ethnic homes and, secondly, to bring the care Ontarians need closer to where they need it. But one thing I would like to be very clear about is that this model will not increase wait times for anyone else. Ontarians with the greatest needs are still given priority for available bed spaces. This model only applies when two or more people in crisis have the same urgency of need. In those cases, priority is given to the applicant who is matching that ethnic designation.

We also have invested in our amazing staff, about whom I've spoken earlier in my speech. Over the last five years, our government invested nearly \$5 billion to hire, train and retain tens of thousands of long-term-care employees and provide residents with an average of four hours of direct care to be provided per resident, per day by nurses and PSWs. I'm happy to report today that we have hit that for our average for a full year now. It means four consecutive quarters. The team has done incredible work. Our operators have done incredible work to hire, recruit, train and retain these staff, so I'm very, very proud that now it's been a full year that we have hit that target. We also, of course, have an average of 36 minutes of direct care to be provided per resident, per day by our allied health professionals, who are such an integral part of our team.

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The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: So when we compare to 2021, residents now receive an average of one hour and 15 additional minutes of daily direct care from nurses and PSWs, which is the equivalent of 19 days—19 days—of additional care per year.

We will continue investing in our staff. We have so many different training programs that I just don't have time to list. It's a \$1.92-billion staffing boost, which is permanent funding, year over year.

Members, I really look forward to taking your questions. I'm really, really proud of the work that we have accomplished together. It is not perfect, but it's definitely much better than where we were about five years ago. We will continue building on that progress and continue supporting our residents, families and our incredible staff. Thank you very much.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you for your presentation, Minister.

We will now begin questions and answers, in rotations of 15 minutes for the official opposition members, 15 minutes for the third party member, five minutes for the independent member, and 15 minutes for the government members.

As always, please remember to make your comments through the Chair.

To any ministry staff appearing, please state your name and title when you are called upon to speak so that we can accurately record your name and position.

I will now start with the official opposition. I recognize MPP Gates.

MPP Wayne Gates: I was wondering why you looked at me when you said "through the Chair." I was just wondering if that was from other days or something.

I want to start by making a bit of a statement, if you don't mind. I want to mention my good friend Burd Sisler, who was the oldest living Canadian. He passed this April. He would have been 111 years old—just a couple of weeks before, he died. Sometimes people do the right things. I want to say to the minister how much it was appreciated that you came to Fort Erie. It was appreciated—the fact that you even brought a visitor with you, your newborn son, which shows that we have a minister who actually cares. I think that's important. When you work together, you get a lot of good things done. We've got a lot of work to do on this file; there's no doubt about it. But when we're having people live to be 111—I'm going and hanging certificates at 110 years old, 105, 100 years old—we're doing some things right. We've got to do some things better. But I think where we are today, from where we were when I first took this job as a critic, I think, seven years ago—we're head and shoulders above where we were, although I'm going to probably hammer you on some of these questions, and you understand that.

I want to finish by saying that today is my mother-in-law's 91st birthday. She's in heaven. My wife retired early to take care of her mom, her dad, and now her aunt. When I left the house this morning to drive to Toronto, I said to my wife, "What can I say to the minister that you would like me to say?" She spent 10 of the last 11 years taking

care of family members. She said, “Staffing, staffing, staffing. There’s not enough.” So I want to relay that message from my wife as well. Thank you for allowing me to say that.

Now I’ll get into my questions.

The government promoted stronger enforcement and higher maximum fines when the act was passed in 2021. Advocates want to know how often the long-term-care minister has actually used those powers.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: When it comes to our inspections and enforcement, I’m so proud to report that we have doubled the number of our inspectors. Chair, 342 is the latest number of inspectors, which—for our gamut of over 600 homes. That’s about one inspector per home. I believe that last year we did about 10,000 inspections, which is a lot. We ask a lot of our operators. And we’re in there all the time. I’m proud to say that, as of last year—September 2025—we have completed a proactive inspection in every single one of our homes, and going forward, starting 2026, we are going to have a proactive inspection yearly in every single one of our homes. It’s October 1, and I can tell you that for 2026, we are about 80% done for our proactive inspections. Of course, we also have the reactive inspections, when we get something through the complaints line or family members are reaching out, or staff; there are whistle-blowers as well in our homes—

MPP Wayne Gates: I don’t mean to cut you off, Minister, but I’m going to.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Go ahead.

MPP Wayne Gates: I just want to know how many have been fined.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: I will pass on that question to the deputy. You’re asking about the administrative monetary penalties, the AMPs?

MPP Wayne Gates: Yes.

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Hi. Peter Kaftarian, deputy minister, Ministry of Long-Term Care.

For 2025, there were just over 190 AMPs, for about \$750,000.

MPP Wayne Gates: Do you know what the total amount would have been, dollar value?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Sorry; \$759,000 in monetary fines.

MPP Wayne Gates: I appreciate that.

Under the 2026-27 funding model, what happened to the unspent balance in each of the four funding envelopes, as “other accommodation” is still the only core level of care envelope where an unused surplus can be retained is by the licensee? So what happens with the other money of those core issues?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Year over year, our homes—of course, we do financial reconciliations. They usually happen about two, three years later; that’s just the nature of our system. So if homes did not spend money in those four envelopes—we always flow the money ahead of time, and then if the homes don’t spend them, they do return those monies back to us.

I believe—and, Deputy, correct me if I’m wrong—this year was about \$20 million that was returned. So it’s not a

huge amount, in a \$10-billion ministry, that was returned. But, of course, we have to do our due diligence. If homes receive more money than they need, of course, they are required to return it to us.

Deputy, can you correct that number?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: I think that number is an accounts receivable number, Minister, yes. So homes will know and expect to have to repay if they don’t have their beds filled.

I would also just add to the minister’s comment that it’s possible, if there’s underspending in certain areas of the ministry, it can be used to offset pressures in other parts of the ministry. So sometimes it’s reconciled and returned. In other cases, if there’s underspending, we can use it to fund other pressures.

MPP Wayne Gates: I understand that, but all I’m asking is, of the surplus that is left over—say it’s \$20 million—does it all come back to the ministry, or does the licensee keep some of that?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: As the deputy mentioned, in some cases, we can reallocate that money to fund other pressures within the ministry. But the envelopes are pretty strict and defined, so if the operators did not spend them for what it was intended to—for example, the “nursing and personal care” envelope, it’s very specific; the “food” envelope, it’s very specific. If those monies are not spent, it is our full expectation that the operator will return those monies.

MPP Wayne Gates: No, I understand that. So what you’re saying is, the corporation is not keeping any of the funds that are not used as a form of their profit? That’s what I’m asking.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: As you know, there is one envelope, which is the “other accommodation” envelope, and I believe that is the only envelope through which it is allowed to draw profits.

The other envelopes are protected, and if they are not used for the purposes—and those are very strict, and they’re not flexible at all—they were intended to, then those monies are returned to the ministry.

MPP Wayne Gates: I’m asking about the “other accommodation.” I think I know the answer. The corporation can keep the money in in some cases. That’s fine.

For each of for-profit projects approved under the current capital funding program, what is the minister’s total capital funding commitment per bed?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: We have about 81 projects that were currently approved through the capital funding program. We have a pretty even mix of for-profit and non-profit in our capital portfolio. And both for-profit and non-profit will receive the same amount of dollars, depending on the geographical market segment they are located in. For example, in the greater Toronto-Hamilton area, that envelope, which is the most generous, it’s about \$750,000 per bed, out of which the government will fund up to 85% of eligible capital costs.

The difference between for-profit and non-profit is that those non-profit operators will get those dollars much earlier on in the construction process. So that gives them a

lot more financial leverage and better financing options to actually fund these programs.

So we have four different market segments, and that's the most generous one because we know the greater Toronto-Hamilton area is very, very expensive, and that's why it's at \$750,000 per bed.

MPP Wayne Gates: Thank you.

When Ontario provides capital funding to a private operator under the capital development scheme to each home, after the lease is over, who owns the home?

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Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: We give the lease for a number of 30 years—or it's a licence; we give the licence for 30 years. When that lease is coming to expiration—so, let's say, in the last five years—what we're actually doing right now is a reaffirmation strategy. We're approaching those whose licences are about to expire and we're having that conversation: "Are you going to redevelop?" If yes, then we will go through the whole capital process. If they are not going to redevelop, then that's a very different conversation about potentially pulling those licences back.

That work is actually ongoing currently because we know, realistically, out of all the 620 homes, there is a number of them who are approaching that limit. The vast majority of them are redeveloping, but there are some that, for various reasons, will not be redeveloping, and then those licences will be returned to the system.

MPP Wayne Gates: So we own it at the end. If they decide that, after 30 years, the place is run down and they don't want to fix the roof or whatever, they can walk away and then it comes to us.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Well, they always have an option to sell those licences. We have seen that happen on one occasion, where a new operator took over and bought for a nominal value. But for the most part, we see the redevelopment happening.

MPP Wayne Gates: I'm fine with the answer. You're good.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Okay.

MPP Wayne Gates: Does the minister collect information on dividends or giveaways to shareholders paid by long-term-care licensees in Ontario?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: I can tell you that we have a number of corporate structures and for-profit operators. The way these corporations work is very convoluted and very complex, so it's very, very difficult for us to actually access that information.

Deputy, do you have any more insight on that?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: I would just add, Minister, that the ministry does not specifically track that information.

MPP Wayne Gates: Thank you.

In Ontario, private, for-profit homes had higher rates of COVID-19 outbreaks and deaths. The risk of death was 25% higher than municipal homes according to one study. A 2016 study showed that hours of care were significantly lower in private homes than public and not-for-profit. Does the minister consider this when granting 60% of the new builds to private companies?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: How many per cent, sorry?

MPP Wayne Gates: I've got 60%.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Sixty, okay. I think the number is closer to 50-50, but it also fluctuates because I'm approving new projects almost daily. But we do keep an eye on it to make sure there's an almost even split between non-profits and for-profits, because we do have concerns about market concentration. We don't want to have one behemoth company owning the majority of stakes in our long-term-care sector, so we do keep an eye on it. We do have tools, as I've mentioned, to support more redevelopment in the not-for-profit sector.

But the reality is, with the current waiting list that we have, we need everyone at the table—whoever wants to build long-term care and, of course, follows all the guidelines, procedures and meets all the criteria. We will work with everyone, because we need to build homes in every single community, including in yours, MPP Gates. We're not in a position to be super choosy when it comes to who is our partner.

MPP Wayne Gates: Okay, I'll do my next question, and you started to answer it: This year, the long-term-care minister is spending \$9.37 billion, which is record spending. Why is the government running so far behind its bed targets for 2030, despite relying heavily on for-profit homes built by large corporations?

There are a couple of questions here in all: How many beds behind is the minister at this point in time? My understanding is that 50,000 people are still on a wait-list. That's certainly in the estimates. Tens of thousands of beds behind; they need to complete—the exact number—49,649 by 2028 to meet the target. It sounds like that's almost impossible, that we're going to reach that target.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Yes, so I would say that we've made incredible progress. The current number we're working with: It's about 27,000 beds that have been completed, are under construction or have received approval. The number of projects that have been completed is about 77 projects, representing close to 11,000 beds, which I think is great progress.

We have lost three construction seasons as a result of COVID. That poses some challenges in terms of our goals and how quickly we're proceeding. But I can tell you, with the amount of projects that are coming through every day to my desk to begin construction, to receive the licence allocation etc., I still remain very confident that we are on a good path forward to reaching those goals.

We have also introduced a new program, which is a renovation program—maybe you haven't heard; this was maybe a couple of months ago—where we are allowing homes to actually renovate and keep the structure intact. Obviously, it needs architectural and engineering sign-off to make sure—

MPP Wayne Gates: Can I just reclaim my time? Because I know it's almost up. Is that okay?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Go ahead.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You've got one minute, nine seconds remaining.

MPP Wayne Gates: I knew it was close.

Can the minister confirm whether or not there is any chance of meeting its own bed targets by 2028? How can the minister expect to get 58,000 new or upgraded beds when it's only managed 8,500 and you just said—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

MPP Wayne Gates: Thank you. And you just said that—

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Eleven thousand.

MPP Wayne Gates: It's actually 11,000, so my numbers are about 2,500 wrong, but I'll admit that on my end.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: So 11,000 opened and about 27,000 sort of in progress. I remain very optimistic. The renovation program will bring us closer to that date. I remain optimistic that by 2028, we will start progress on those beds.

Will we finish all those beds by 2028? I'm not quite sure, but I'm confident that we are on a path forward that will bring us to our goal.

MPP Wayne Gates: What do I got left?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Eighteen seconds.

MPP Wayne Gates: Eighteen seconds—all right. I'll pass it on to my colleagues from the Liberal Party.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Sounds good.

MPP Wayne Gates: Go to it, buddy.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Collard.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Thank you very much, and merci beaucoup, madame la Ministre, d'être ici cet après-midi. Thank you especially for being forthcoming with your answers and not trying to avoid the answers and, you know, speaking the truth. I will join my colleague MPP Gates when he says we have a minister who cares about long-term care.

I've seen it because you've been to my riding more than once. And I've seen it because when you were first appointed and you wanted to visit one of the many long-term cares that I have in my riding, you were going to visit the Bruyère one, which is, like, top of the line. I convinced you to go and visit an alternative one that has more challenges. and you accepted to do that, because I felt like you really wanted to see what was happening on the ground. So I'm really grateful.

If it's okay, I would like to ask you just a few questions about long-term care for francophones. I don't know if you have the numbers readily or if somebody can provide those—and I'll do it in English so that I don't put people in a disposition where they won't be able to answer. But you do know that the ability for francophones—older people, especially, when you're 80, 90 years old—to be able to receive services in French is so important, because it can affect not only communication but their dignity, safety and the quality of care in itself.

Ontario's 2026 francophone affairs report confirms that the Centre d'Accueil Champlain received full designation for services and programs delivered on behalf of the Ministry of Long-Term Care, while the government is reviewing the entire list of designated agencies.

I know you do have a project that you announced in Aurora that's going to have 160 French-designated long-term-care beds. But I'm wondering if you have the number as to how many long-term-care beds in Ontario are currently designated to provide services in French.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Currently, we have about 2,100 beds that are designated under the FLSA.

In terms of our capital projects, out of the 165, we have 20 that have self-identified as providing cultural language and other services for francophone residents, and nine have self-identified as providing cultural and language programs and services to Indigenous residents. That's something we continue to track. And of course, with my dual role now, one of the things that I think may work well for us to get more designated beds is also to talk to our anglophone partners—whether that's Sienna, Extendicare, Schlegel or our non-profit partners as well—to see whether, within an anglophone home, we could potentially designate a floor or a resident home area.

Because it's very difficult for the francophone community to come together and put forward a project. The Aurora project is amazing, but it's still in its infancy and we're of course working to help them along. It's a non-profit project. We have Foyer Richelieu in the Niagara region; they are doing amazing work. But we need more partners. So I think a good strategy to get us to where we want to be is to also have smaller designated areas within anglophone homes and organizations.

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M^{me} Lucille Collard: Yes, I like that solution. Do you know how many francophones are currently on the waiting list for French-language long-term-care beds in the province of Ontario?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Deputy, is that something we're tracking?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Yes, I actually have that number. As of the end of June 2026, there are around 1,700 applicants who identify French as their first language waiting for long-term care.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Okay. You have in your plans a plan to build thousands of new long-term-care beds, and I think that's great. What portion of that would be franco-phone beds or for the francophone population?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: As you know, the designation process is a voluntary one. So if long-term-care homes come voluntarily and want to designate as francophone, we'd be more than happy to do that, but if we don't have such proponents that want to designate, it's kind of difficult for us if we don't have anyone in the system.

I am having these conversations with our system partners, like CNF, for example. They're building a home in Ottawa, and they've committed that they will designate one floor in Ottawa for francophones.

They also have a project in Mississauga, and I'm pleading with them. I'm talking to them, and I'm hoping we can find a solution to designate a few beds in Mississauga, but their concern is that Mississauga does not have the same number of potential employees, like PSWs and

nurses, that they could hire. So I will put them in touch with Collège Boréal, who can potentially provide those staff because, as you know, they have a campus here, in the Distillery District.

But of course there is hesitancy, because once you become designated, then you have to meet these certain criteria. Our operators are not taking that lightly. It's an additional responsibility, and so they're doing their due diligence before they agree to move forward with that process.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Okay. Do you know the number of complaints that may exist regarding access to franco-phone beds for—

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: I think le commissaire Bouchard is the one who keeps track of those complaints. When I read his report from last year, there was only a very small section on long-term care. We didn't see a huge influx in complaints on long-term care, but having said that, I will follow up with him to see what is the volume of complaints that he may receive on long-term care and access to French-language services.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Thank you very much, Minister.

I will yield the rest of my time to my colleague MPP Watt.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Watt.

MPP Tyler Watt: Thank you, and a big thank you to everyone for all the work that you do. This is a very important file to me. I actually started off my nursing career in long-term care at the very start of the pandemic. I love my seniors. I've been working with them my entire nursing career.

I want to say, Minister, that it is really, really inspiring for me to see a fellow nurse in the role that you are. Even in your opening statement today, the nurse really shines through everything that you say. I had a big smile on my face during that.

Minister, you did talk about bed targets and capacity a little bit already and about how your government has made significant commitments to building new and upgraded long-term-care beds across Ontario. I would like to know if you can give us an update on where things currently stand and whether you're confident the province is on track to meet its 2028 target.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Great question. As I've said, we have 165 projects that are either completed, under construction or have received approval, and every single day, I'm signing off on more projects, more allocations. To date, we have opened up 11,000 long-term-care homes or beds.

But, of course, there is a lot more work to do. That's why one of the things that I did this year is introduce the renovation program, because we can't leave any stone unturned. We really need to be innovative about the way we redevelop our beds.

For example, not too far from here, there is a Sienna home called St. George, and it's a special home because it provides a different type of service. We see much younger residents. We see residents with more complex mental

health needs and some that are also using substances, so it's a little bit different than the rest of our homes.

There's no way that particular home would be able to fully redevelop, acquire land in Toronto, which is very expensive, and go through the process. But what they could do—and they have submitted their application—is actually just renovate. It's a different strategy, and we're hoping that strategy will bring us closer to redeveloping those beds and achieving our targets.

Another tool that we're using is the use of unused government surplus lands. We have successfully used three lands currently: one for the Aurora project, the franco-phone project; a beautiful project in Hamilton with our Schlegel Villages—they're building two long-term-care homes and some assisted living with Indwell; and another one in Oakville.

We have a whole gamut of unused government lands currently that we are reviewing for the purpose of potentially building long-term care, so that's another tool in our tool box to bring us close to those targets. Those targets are very, very ambitious. As I said, we lost three construction years as a result of COVID. We are playing catch-up.

I am very confident in the progress we have done so far and the excitement that I am seeing among our operators and the people putting forward projects to build. Give us a little bit more time and hopefully next year, when I come back, I'll have even more progress to report to you.

MPP Tyler Watt: Great. Thank you, Minister. It's very refreshing to hear real answers here today.

You actually kind of touch on my follow-up question here: What are some of the biggest challenges that you've been encountering in getting projects from approval in construction and ultimately opening their doors?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: There are many. There are many people and communities, especially in the not-for-profit space, that come together and really want to open a long-term-care home. But I think people don't fully realize how much work and regulation and everything that needs to happen for the long-term-care home to be built.

One of the challenges that we're seeing is with access to land. Especially in the GTHA area, land is very, very expensive. That's why, in our capital funding program, actual land cost is something that we do consider and it is part of the eligible expenses—up to 85%—that the government will cover. So we have responded to that specific need.

Access to trades can be a barrier, especially for projects in the north. So that is a real challenge for construction in the north.

Sometimes we've seen some really bad architectural design—that we're in the middle of building the home and the pipes are not placed in the right place, and so then we see change orders and it's difficult.

Sometimes we see politics, especially in our municipal homes. We see politics get in the way of actually building long-term-care homes.

And so, there's a whole variety of reasons why sometimes these projects don't come to fruition, but the team is very, very responsive. Our capital branch works with our

partners, our operators, our architects. They're very responsive. We try to problem-solve every single project, but every project is unique. Every project has different challenges, and so we try to work as much as possible to work through and find solutions.

MPP Tyler Watt: Thank you, Minister.

I was really happy to hear that you've hit the four-hour mark. That's a really great milestone, and congratulations on that.

On that note, we know that we wouldn't be able to hit this target without our amazing health care workers, whether that be the nurses, the PSWs, the physiotherapists, everyone that's involved in that team. I'm wondering if you can walk us through how the ministry plans to fund the ongoing care associated with the increase in beds and maintaining that goal of the four hours of care.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: A very good question. In order to achieve that target, we have funded that \$4.9 billion over those five years. Now that we have achieved those targets, we have made a \$1.92-billion permanent funding for our ad hoc targets and our level of care. Last year, we received a 2% across-the-board increase for our operations, and so that's reflected there.

In terms of our forecasting and forward planning, every single new bed that comes online is fully funded, so that's all part of our projections for the future. We don't just fund the capital. We also plan for the operations of those beds at that four-hour target. That's a permanent target. That's legislated; that's here to stay. So any new beds that open are funded for those targets.

MPP Tyler Watt: Okay. So every new bed comes along with those operational payments as well?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: A hundred per cent.

MPP Tyler Watt: Awesome.

With that direct care and staffing—so the funding is there. A big topic and theme that I often bring up in the chamber is the recruiting and retention of our health care workers, particularly that focus on retention, because, without them, we wouldn't be able to do it, right? I understand how it can be a bit more appealing to go to a hospital—perhaps a different type of care that you do, perhaps some more support as well.

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What initiatives are you doing in recruitment and retention, when it come to nurses, PSWs and other health care workers in long-term care?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: We have some amazing incentive programs for our PSWs who come from outside of long-term care.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Whether you're a new PSW or are working somewhere else, there's a \$10,000 incentive to join long-term care, for a one-year return of service. We have a northern supplement as well. If you decide to relocate to the north to support our homes there, there is a \$10,000 relocation bonus and a \$10,000 incentive for working in the north. So a PSW can get up to an additional \$30,000 to join long-term care in the north.

For our nurses, we have a \$20,000 incentive with a two-year return of service.

So, yes, we have some really amazing incentives. That's why I always say, "Long-term care is hiring. Please join long-term care, because we have these incentives available."

Further to that, we have many career laddering options. A PSW can become an RPN or an RPN can become an RN through the program called BEGIN. The ministry will actually fund their tuition, cost of books etc. They will actually give money for the homes to backfill—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

We'll now go on to the independent member. I'll recognize MPP Clancy.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I want to thank the minister. We're really getting clear answers today. We've been here a couple of days. I appreciate that you've done your homework, you know the file well, and you're ready to be honest and humble at times about where you're at in the process. And thanks to the staff for making time and coming down here today. I know you work quite hard to make this happen.

There's lots of good news. I appreciate that the targets are hard to miss because of the silver tsunami that is happening in Ontario, but I do appreciate the efforts that are being made to bring more beds online.

I feel like LTCs are being impacted by the lack of beds being developed in other areas. For example, we are seeing freezing of supportive housing for folks with disabilities and a very minimal amount of beds being funded for folks with addiction and mental health issues. I'm very concerned. While I know there's a wait-list, we have a doubling of seniors—in my region and MPP Riddell's region—homeless in one year. And I've seen, myself, folks with ALS and Parkinson's who are in the shelter system.

Can you speak to the population in the long-term-care system who would be best served outside of that system if those beds were available?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: It's a great question. It's something that we're keeping an eye on, especially when it comes to complex mental health and addictions issues. We are really trying to track those numbers—I believe the last we saw was about 4,000 folks living across our 80,000 long-term-care licensed spaces. We are doing some work, and it's sort of in its infancy. We recognize that those folks have very different needs and the training that the staff require to help support those needs is very different. I can't say too much today, but hopefully we'll see in the near future some policy work on that issue. The last thing that I want to do, as the Minister of Long-Term Care, is close the doors and say, "No, you don't fit neatly into our long-term-care box. Therefore, we will not allow you in."

At the same time, we know that sometimes when these residents come in and the staff are not equipped to fully understand their needs and help de-escalate situations, we are putting other residents—elderly who are in their nineties—at risk. So there is some policy work that's ongoing. We're working with partners. BSO will definitely be a big

partner for us. We have some applications, currently, that we're reviewing, for how we can better support those who might have a dual diagnosis; for example, dementia and a complex mental health issue. That work is ongoing.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I know you're always advocating for more dollars for your beds, but is that part of your role—to highlight these areas where we could free up beds if other ministries were given money to grow their beds?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Well, I would say that those folks age too, so whether they're currently 60 and have those needs—they will be aging, as well, so they will have more medical needs as they age.

I think what we're trying to do is deal with those issues within our long-term-care homes. We have about 4,000 of those folks with those demographics. So perhaps creating some specialized units for those—similar to our BSUs, behavioural specialized units, but for designated complex mental health—I think, would be a good part of the solution.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I appreciate the project in Hamilton, and I think I've told you a lot about Sunnyside in my riding.

Is that going to be a model that you'll be pursuing, where we have supportive housing in tandem with retirement homes? Because from the folks in my riding, they've said folks come out of hospital; they're very sick; they end up in long-term care because they need more than the four hours in home care, but then they get better, and then they're able to transition to the supportive housing next door.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Is that a model that you'll look to repeat more often?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: We have some models of campuses of care, for example Schlegel Villages and others, that already co-locate retirement homes with long-term care. The model in Hamilton—that was actually Schlegel Villages that took on the partnership with Indwell to build that supportive housing. So those partners came together naturally.

I do think it's a great model, to co-locate those different types of housing on one campus. Certainly, it's something worth looking into.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I would appreciate it if you were able to do that, because I know it makes a world of difference in bringing down the cost of providing supportive housing and care, and it helps minimize transitions and free up beds for the more high-acuity residents.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Thank you.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Thanks.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): We'll now move on to the government. I recognize MPP Leardi.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Minister, I have questions about construction costs.

Recently, in my riding, a new facility was opened, welcoming 160 residents in the municipality of Lakeshore. And, Minister, you were personally present in the town of Amherstburg, where we witnessed the construction that's

under way on another facility, which will eventually open and welcome another 160 residents in Amherstburg.

But, as you know, Minister, the costs of these projects are coming under pressure due to the tariff war between the United States and Canada.

So my question has to do with construction costs. Here we are at estimates today. What is your ministry doing or going to do about the rising pressure on construction costs as a result of the tariff war between the United States and Canada, and how are you going to get shovels in the ground on these new projects?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: That's an excellent question. Our capital funding program is the most generous that we've seen, probably in the history of our country, but also across other jurisdictions. I don't think anyone else is funding long-term care the way we are—85% of eligible costs.

So for now, even if there are some pressures with tariffs and cost of construction going up, our funding model is actually still able to meet the costs of those rising costs. It's something that we are keeping an eye on. Maybe deputy can elaborate on this, but to date, we have not seen it become a real barrier for today. But certainly, it's something that we're keeping a close look at.

And shall a time come where we need to intervene in terms of supporting construction costs, we do have some intervention frameworks where we can intervene and infuse additional costs to ensure that our projects get completed.

Deputy, can you supplement?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: We have had some homes come to us with some financial challenges, and we will work with them if this comes up, as the minister mentioned. But I think the minister has given a pretty good answer on some of the challenges we're seeing.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Thank you.

My first question was about construction costs and homes. Now, I want to go back to actually people's personal homes and talk about people who want to remain in their home for as long as possible. They want to remain in their home. Maybe they're getting support from family and friends; they have a social network that they want to remain close to and rely on.

What is your ministry doing today? Here we are at estimates today. What is your ministry doing to assist people in staying in their own homes for as long as possible before they go to or transition to a different home or even enjoy the rest of their days enjoying their own home with the support of their surrounding family and friends?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: The seniors who are on our waiting list or soon to be eligible is a population that we're keeping a very close eye on.

The program that I talked about, Community Access to Long-Term Care, is a pilot for now, but in the future, I would love to see maybe every other of our long-term-care homes have a Community Access to Long-Term Care program, so it can welcome residents, maybe once a week, to have a nice meal together. Maybe, if they need help with

showering, twice a week, they can come into their long-term-care home to help with that.

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Some other clinical supports: Podiatry is a big topic for seniors, and so having access to podiatry that long-term-care homes could provide for the seniors living in the community. That's sort of the idea between this pilot program, Community Access to Long-Term Care.

We also have the community paramedicine program, which has been transferred to the Ministry of Health, but, of course, it continues to serve those on our waiting list. We have community paramedics in every single region of our province, and they do incredible work checking in on our seniors, providing point-of-care testing, providing some diagnostics, doing wellness checks, helping to manage medications. And so, through those community paramedicine services, the seniors can remain in their home much longer. That's another program that that has high success. All of the paramedic chiefs are just raving about it, and they have new, innovative ideas who to maybe add—maybe a social worker, maybe a crisis intervention worker—and so, that program is evolving, but it currently sits at the Ministry of Health.

So yes, that's definitely the population we're keeping an eye on and we want to support. As you know, the Ministry of Health has increased spending in home care to the tune of billions of dollars, and we need to continue supporting folks who want to remain at home. But at the same time, we say "aging in place," and I sometimes worry that for some it may mean "aging in loneliness." I think that's why it's really, really paramount that we have programs like Community Access to Long-Term Care, but also programs through the Ministry for Seniors where we have seniors active living centres, where seniors can get together, play bingo, where they can learn to dance cha-cha for example. I attended one a couple of weeks ago. Our Minister for Seniors, as you know, is doing incredible work to keep our seniors active and engaged. And so it's a whole-of-government approach to make sure that our seniors are well taken care of.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Pang.

Mr. Billy Pang: Chair, through you: Minister, thank you for a great job. Thank you for visiting my riding so many times.

My question is about hiring, training and retaining staff. I know that our government made it a priority to hire and train staff to ensure residents receive an average of over four hours of direct care per day. This year, we exceeded that target. Can you explain some of the ways your ministry is ensuring that Ontario's long-term-care homes have the staff they need to provide this high-end care to residents?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Great question. As I've said, we have met those targets for four consecutive quarters—so about a year—so that's really great news. In order for us to get there, we had to hire about 16,000 more staff in long-term care. And so, we have those various incentives, as the ones I've already outlined: \$20,000 for nurses, \$10,000 for PSWs.

But for me, when I go into classes of nursing students, and I ask them, "How many of you want to work in long-term care?" I don't see too many hands go up. And I think it's because we have to do a better job at promoting that in long-term care you can have actually amazing, lifelong careers. That's why the career laddering options that we have, that you can start even as a resident support worker or as a dietary aide, through our learn and earn program, you can become a PSW. A PSW can become an RPN, RPN to RN. And I'm currently starting to work on an RN to NP pathway, because I think we need more amazing NPs working in long-term care, and we want to grow our own. That's why I really want to sell long-term care as a place where you can have an amazing career, where you can grow your career and something to be really, really proud of. I see different operators do different things as well to really incentivize their employees. For example, in Schlegel Villages, there is a program where PSWs can become managers of a resident home area, become in charge of that resident home area, and be that point of contact for not only staff but also for the families.

There are different, amazing things that are happening within long-term care that makes people want to work there. I visited a class of PSWs about a week ago, with the Premier, and what he highlighted is that, especially in these unsteady economic times, it's really important to have a job that really gives you that paycheck every two weeks. And I think in health care and in long-term care, we do give people that stability, that it's a good paycheck, that it's a lifelong career that you can build—and helping people. There is so much reward in being able to help those vulnerable folks that rely on our care. So we're doing a lot to recruit and retain; we're doing a lot to train them. We have specialized programs, for example, in wound care or dementia.

We'll continue being innovative and nimble. The next big thing is AI—how can we use AI to improve staff training and improve resident outcomes? So I think we're very innovative and we're doing everything we can to make sure that our staff want to work in long-term care.

Mr. Billy Pang: Yes. When I talked to some long-term-care workers, especially RNs, they told me that they have more prospects in hospitals compared to smaller-sized long-term-care facilities. How are we going to deal with those issues?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: I think that issue will always be there. For me, as an RN, I started my career in the emergency room because I am a very type A personality and I wanted to be part of that action. But I think, with the different incentives that we have, we're attracting more and more talent to long-term care. Hopefully, with the program that I'm working on for an NP pathway, we'll have even more potential options.

But the reality as well—and that's why we are seeing some turnover in long-term care—is that it's not for everyone, right? When I talked about those therapeutic relationships and those caring moments, not everyone is able to do that, and that's okay. But we're trying to really minimize that turnover rate in long-term care.

I think by having programs—for example, the Living Classroom, which we’ve implemented in about 50 of our long-term-care homes, where we have students, whether it’s PSW or nursing students, be in the home from day one. They have a classroom within the long-term-care home where they learn the theory, and then they go practise the theory right on the floor with the residents. From day one, they’re exposed to that work environment. We’re seeing much higher retention rates through those programs. We see an about 90% retention rate after they graduate. They start working in long-term care because of that exposure early on in their education.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Jordan.

Mr. John Jordan: Thank you, Minister, for all the work you’ve been doing in long-term care. I’ve got four new homes in my riding and another one on the way, so it means a lot to my constituents.

I did want to mention, as PA, I’m in a lot of long-term-care homes. I’ve talked to a lot of staff, and I always ask how things are going to the staff themselves. I think the big difference that’s happened under your leadership is the four hours of care, the additional staffing. There’s a work-life balance that has come there. So as far as recruitment and retention and the things that you’ve just mentioned, that staffing level has meant a lot, so congratulations.

I also know that you meet with staff every morning. There’s a long-term-care machine happening here. I’ve witnessed that.

My question is around safety. When a family puts their loved one in long-term care, they want to know they’re safe and they want to know that there’s accountability for them, when they’re not available to be there in particular. Families have gotten spread out over generations. So, as a government, we owe it to those families to ensure that every resident in long-term care is given a safe, comfortable home. We’re certainly working on the comfort end of it.

Can you explain some of the investments our government has made in inspections and enforcement that provide transparency for families so they can have reassurance that their loved ones are safe?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Thank you so much—a very important question. Of course, those decisions to place a loved one in long-term care are very difficult. I speak to many, many families who are really torn, and I try to assure them that long-term care is a good place, a safe place, where residents will receive 24/7 nursing care. That’s a commitment that we make to those families.

That’s why, when we doubled the number of our inspectors with a \$72.3-million investment, it really helped us to get to where we need to be, which is to have one proactive inspection in every home. That’s a goal we set for ourselves, and that’s a goal that we have achieved.

Our inspectors are extremely busy, not only doing those proactive and reactive inspections. They’re also busy doing pre-occupancy inspections because, as new homes come online, we, of course, need to make sure that they follow the building code, the fire code, all of our compliance measures, all of our regulations. So we have our

inspectors criss-crossing the province every day to ensure that the new homes meet all of the safety requirements before we actually move any of our residents in.

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We also have a specialized investigations unit, which is fairly new. It’s a unit which has authority to lay charges under the act and to investigate more serious allegations; for example, failing to protect a resident from abuse or neglect, repeated and ongoing non-compliance, failing to comply with ministry inspectors’ orders etc.

For the most part, our homes are doing an amazing job, but of course, once in a while, there might be a serious situation which requires a higher level of inspection, and that’s why we have this specialized investigations unit to send there to really do a much deeper analysis of the occurrence and hopefully some remediation recommendations as well.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Mr. John Jordan: Thank you.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Pierre.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: Thank you, Minister. I’ll start with my question. I think we’ll probably run out of time, but perhaps we can come back to it in the next round, but it’s really around operational costs for long-term care.

We’ve heard about how our government is building new long-term care, redeveloping beds; we heard about staff, staff training. But we still need to make sure these homes have the resources that they need to provide a safe and comfortable environment for the residents who live there. Can you explain to the committee some of the investments your ministry is making to ensure that every long-term-care home in the province of Ontario has the operational funding they need to provide the high level of care that residents need?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

We’ll now go to the official opposition. I recognize MPP Gates.

MPP Wayne Gates: Minister, this is a question that was asked at other social policy committees that I participated in: How many homes have not received reimbursement for their Bill 124 expenses? What will the minister do to fix this? How is this accounted for in the ministry’s expected spending?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Thank you. I think in our last estimates we brought forward those numbers. I think we were almost at 99% that have received Bill 124 retroactive payments.

Deputy, do you have any more details about this year’s estimates—if there are any homes that are still waiting for retroactive Bill 124 payments?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: I would say that the work we were doing with homes on the Bill 124 retro is complete. There were some follow-ups with some homes; there were deadlines provided and extensions, and we got to a point where we were required to call time, if the homes—a couple of homes who were getting updated data were unable to get their requests in on time. There are other means to

support those homes if they have financial pressures, working with Ontario Health. But as far as whether the 124 retro is complete, that work is done.

MPP Wayne Gates: Okay, because we're hearing from not-for-profit homes that they have not been reimbursed. So maybe you could either send me a copy of everybody that's been reimbursed or I'll try and get you the name of the homes—

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: All 620 homes?

MPP Wayne Gates: What's that? Or you could maybe just—I'll send you the names of the homes that have not been reimbursed and we can work it out to make sure that they are getting their money under Bill 124.

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: We're happy to look into any specific cases where homes feel like they may not have received or they were concerned, and homes that I'm aware of that have reached out to us, we have—we'll listen to those concerns, we'll work with the home, we'll talk to Ontario Health. There's a process for homes that are having financial challenges, but the formality of the process—of gathering that information and paying it out within the ministry—is complete. Some homes, I know, have continued to raise some concerns, and if they haven't raised it with us, or you've got names of homes who have concerns, we're happy to look into it.

MPP Wayne Gates: Thank you.

When you're looking at the balance sheet in these estimates, we aren't seeing capital for new homes given all at once; it's given out over 25 years. Does that provide any real savings to the government or does it just defer costs?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: I mean, when you get a mortgage on your home, do you pay everything up front or do you pay it over the term of the mortgage?

MPP Wayne Gates: I always thought estimates was that I ask the questions and you respond with answers. I'm just saying. I appreciate your answer.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Thank you.

MPP Wayne Gates: It shouldn't be surprising that over 60% of new homes that broke ground or were announced during the last few years are private. My numbers are saying 23% were not-for-profit and 15% are public. Why does the ministry use a funding model that heavily favours the big companies in long-term care who access the funds up front? The reason why I'm saying that is that what we find or the complaints that we get are that they feel that if you're a for-profit home, it's about profit, and if it's a not-for-profit or a regional home in my area, they feel that the care is better because all the money is going to care and not necessarily figuring out how to pay a CEO. That's where the question came from.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: As far as I know, when it comes to our capital portfolio, we are trying to keep a 50-50 split. I can refer to one of the ADMs to see if they have more up-to-date numbers.

However, as I mentioned, we need everyone at the table because the need is huge. So through our capital funding program, we are giving major advantages to non-profit operators where we flow them the money much earlier in

the process. It makes them much more cash-liquid and able to obtain their financing, which is something we don't extend to our for-profit operators. We also have some loan guarantees that non-profit operators can apply for, and there are some projects that have successfully done that.

Deputy, did you want to give more details on that?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Yes. We are seeing that more of the homes that are redeveloping are the for-profit homes at this time, but we do have other programs the minister has referenced where homes can get loans through Infrastructure Ontario that the ministry is able to guarantee. Then there is also the ability to get homes through the BOF, and there have been six homes, for-profit and not-for-profit, who have been able to get loans through that organization as well.

MPP Wayne Gates: Okay. I appreciate that. This is a follow-up to that as well. On September 23, Global News released an article showing tens of millions in spending to bail out long-term-care homes in crisis. The article shows that the number of bailed out homes is on the rise, but only some numbers were provided.

The numbers that I have, again, are the numbers that I have, and they might not be as up-to-date as your staff may have. The spending included, in 2021-22, \$2.4 million; in 2022-23, \$9.7 million; in 2023-24, \$9.7 million; in 2024-25, \$17.2 million; and 2025-26—2026 isn't completed yet—is \$10.9 million. I'm just wondering: Why is this happening?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: That's a fund called the "homes in distress" fund. Every year, there are a small number of homes—I would say less than 10 per year—that reach out to the ministry when they are in the position of cash failure or they're otherwise unable to meet their financial obligations. The ministry then reviews these cases case by case.

Of course, when eligible, we flow the money, because we need to make sure that the homes remain operational, that our staff are getting paid, that our seniors receive their meals. That fund exists to ensure that on the very rare occasion—we're talking about less than 10 homes among 620—when there are some issues that arise, we are able to fund those homes and give them the money they need to remain operational.

Deputy, did you want to elaborate?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Yes. I would just add, Minister, that we do work very closely with Ontario Health. That's the first step for any home who has identified a financial challenge, to work with our on-the-ground operator to identify what those concerns are. That is the first step in the process. Once Ontario Health has reviewed the request, if they're able to recommend it to the ministry, they would come to the ministry for review, but the first step is always into Ontario Health.

MPP Wayne Gates: How much did the ministry spend this year bailing out homes in crisis? Do we have that number?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: I believe it's around \$10 million, but we can maybe phone a friend.

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: I can clarify, Minister, because I just asked to clarify with the team. So far this year, there are three homes and \$3.7 million.

MPP Wayne Gates: This may be a repeat, because I didn't hear that: How many homes were covered in that emergency spending? How many homes were there this year?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Three.

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: This year, three.

MPP Wayne Gates: Three?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: Yes.

MPP Wayne Gates: And how many patients did these bailouts cover? Would you know how big the homes were?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: I can get that, but I don't have that exact number in front of me.

MPP Wayne Gates: Okay. If you can't provide the numbers today, can you commit to providing them at a future date to the committee? Would that be fine?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Absolutely.

MPP Wayne Gates: If the minister is claiming success in delivering better care, why did you have to spend \$38 million since 2024 to make sure that residents don't lose their care facilities? What is broken in the funding model causing these major bailouts to happen every year? I know the number is small, but are we looking at finding a way to make sure that none of them fail? What are we doing there and how much money was spent on the for-profit homes during that tenure?

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Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: As you mentioned, that number is very small; I think that's over a three-year period. In a ministry that's a \$10-billion ministry, it's a very, very small percentage.

However, it is very important that that fund does exist when these circumstances arise. The last thing we would want to do is close those homes or close those beds or have staff that are being unpaid or, God forbid, having food not delivered to our seniors. So that fund exists for a reason.

When it comes to homes in distress, we do a very thorough process with them to make sure that they are on a fiscal path to balance. The ministry undertakes that process. Sometimes we have third parties that come in to help us with those financial audits to identify the reasons why the home was in distress and to come up with a plan to bring them back to balance.

MPP Wayne Gates: How does the ministry support caregivers—I know you've got a bill that may come forward with caregivers; I was waiting for it in the last session; I talked to you a number of times on it, and I've got one coming in the fall as well—and families when a loved one is on a waiting list, transitioning into a long-term-care bed or recently admitted to long-term care? Where does that money fall in the budget?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Can you clarify your question, when you say caregivers—

MPP Wayne Gates: Okay, I'll read it: How does the ministry support caregivers and families when a loved one is on the waiting list, transitioning into long-term care or recently admitted to long-term care? Where does that money

come from out of the budget? In the notes I have, it's related to page 19, table 2. You might be able to look it up in your notes.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: While our residents are still living at home, a lot of them are receiving supports through home care. Those supports—of course, home care would be listed on the Ministry of Health expenditures, not on ours. Other supports: As I mentioned, the community paramedicine program has also now transitioned to the Ministry of Health.

I'm not I'm not sure which supports you're referring to, because until those residents are in our care, in long-term care—we fund their care once they move into long-term care.

MPP Wayne Gates: No, I appreciate that. Like I said, it's page 19, table 2. I know that crack staff over there is diligently looking at that computer saying, "What's he talking about?"

I'll go on to the next question because I can—

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: We'll try and pull up the page reference.

MPP Wayne Gates: Okay, I appreciate that.

Since implementation of Bill 7, how many ALC patients have been placed in long-term care when their first-choice home was not available?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Many. Many patients were placed—ALC patients—especially when the bill was introduced. As of today, I'm happy to report that our ALC numbers across the system have gone down significantly, which is really a win for the system, because as a nurse that works in the ER, I can tell you that those beds should be reserved for those who clinically and medically need them. The last thing we want is having a long-term-care resident being transferred into the ER to wait for hours on a stretcher. A lot of them have dementia; they become very disoriented with all the beeping and the sterile environment. It is not a place for our long-term-care residents to be in.

So huge efforts were made to make sure that we decreased the number of ED transfers from long-term care, but also those who are eligible for long-term care and are currently waiting in a hospital, that we move them into long-term care as quickly as possible. Those trends have been going down year over year, and I think the Minister of Health is very happy because long-term care is a big partner and part of the solution to really keeping those ALC numbers down.

MPP Wayne Gates: Yes, we actually put a proposal that's in front of the health minister to move ALC patients into our urgent care hospital in Fort Erie and I think it's a great idea. We already have some palliative care there, so that might be something you want to talk to the health minister about on a way to provide health care for our seniors close to home.

My next question was saying: Do you know how many were forced to pay the \$400 fee to remain in the hospital?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: So that was a decision led by hospitals, and I think it was a very, very small number of folks. I know there was one particular case that

received a lot of media attention. But again, I've seen cases in my previous full-time nursing life where we had patients living in the hospital for like six months. Everyone knew them. They would drive around on their scooter with their Tim Hortons, and they would make friends with the janitors, the nurses. But let's be honest: Those beds are reserved for folks who really need them. We shouldn't have people living in hospitals for months at a time.

So I think the number of people who were actually fined is probably close to zero.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: It's very small. But I know there was one particular case that received a lot of media attention.

MPP Wayne Gates: I can appreciate that, but I can tell you that with the alternate level of care, some people are being—you might not like to hear the word, but I believe it's accurate—forced out of our hospitals and put into retirement homes to clear up beds in our hospitals. They don't have the expertise to take care of them in retirement homes. It's happening all the time. I could certainly provide you with some of those details.

That's not helping anybody either. You don't have the staffing to take care of them in retirement homes. Yet, for whatever reason, they're being forced into there instead of going to a place that is close to home.

I think the big issue when it came out in Bill 7, we talked about people being sent, I'll say, from Niagara and shipped to Hamilton or Brampton. It seems like that problem has not raised its ugly head to the degree it did when the bill first came out, but we continue to still—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

We'll now move on to the third party. I recognize MPP Watt.

MPP Tyler Watt: I want to pick up where we left off. We were discussing retention, recruitment and I want to say that something that I really believe in is pay equity across the whole system. This is something that health care groups have been advocating for for quite some time. RNs, RPNs—their scope of practice is the same as those in hospitals. I just want to reiterate that while we're here today, that ongoing need and advocacy from these folks. I think that that would really help out with retention as well, because we focus a lot on recruitment and I was really happy to hear about these incentive programs.

And then you mentioned the BEGIN program. So a quick question: Is that through the Ministry of Long-Term Care or is that Minister Quinn's ministry?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: It's through the Ministry of Long-Term Care, the funding. But I think we have an equivalent program as well at the Ministry of Health.

MPP Tyler Watt: Okay. And that's—people can upskill and train to get towards, like, becoming an RPN, RN?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: That's right, and we work with our partner, WeRPN, which is the RPN association. They're the ones who get the TPA—the transfer payment agreement—and they're the ones who manage the program on behalf of the ministry.

MPP Tyler Watt: Well, it certainly will be perhaps more desirable to go into long-term care right now. Because, unfortunately, a lot of my colleagues in hospitals, who have spent the last possibly seven years training to upskill from RPN to RN, have to actually stay in that RPN position because the RNs are being laid off. So it is good to hear that, at least in long-term care, those positions are there. That will certainly help with the recruitment factor.

What I really advocate for and want to see is that we are taking care of our health care workers. If we take care of our health care workers—and I get that sense from you, from your opening speech and what you've been talking through today. If we take care of them and we listen to them, then they can provide better care for our patients, and that, ultimately, should be the goal.

One thing that I do hear from long-term-care homes is that their operating costs continue to increase, particularly when it comes to staffing. It makes sense, particularly with the goal of having that four-hour, direct-to-patient care. How has the ministry funding evolved to help homes manage those increasing pressures when it comes to increased demand on staffing?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Great question. As I've mentioned, we have hired about 16,000 more staff over the last four years to ensure that we reach and achieve those targets of four hours of direct care per resident per day. We had, about two years ago, a significant increase of about 6% to the operational envelopes of our homes. Last year, that increase was about 2%, operationally speaking, across.

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But, as you know, each home has their own collective agreements and their own bargaining process, which makes my life a little bit harder, because we have probably 300 or 400 separate collective agreements. And that process, of course, happens between the employer and the unions involved. But, at the end of the day, the ministry is the payer for the wages. So there are some challenges that result from that.

We're always looking at ways where we can improve the funding formulas for our PSWs—we've increased, permanently, by \$3 during the pandemic, which absolutely was necessary, otherwise the system would have collapsed. And I'm proud to say that for nurse practitioners, about two years ago, we've increased their salaries—they were around \$120,000 per year—to about \$150,000, to make them very much competitive with the primary care sector. So for those two, we were able to successfully have wage enhancements.

We're always looking at ways to ensure that our staff get valued for the work that they do, but those wage conversations have lots of challenges, especially because we are in that very highly unionized environment.

MPP Tyler Watt: We've seen that target investment that you bring up for PSWs and nurse practitioners. And I do hear frequently, particularly from my RPN colleagues, "Where is our increase?" So I'm just wondering from you, are there any other parts of the long-term-care workforce

where you think compensation or recruitment needs additional attention?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Certainly, the RPN wage creep is something that has been on my mind since two years ago, when I assumed this role, and it's something that we're currently analyzing through policy.

But, of course, you know how this process works. Every year, I go through the SPP cycle with the Minister of Finance, and there are things that get approved and that don't get approved. He has the hard job of seeing the priorities of all ministers—all 30-plus of us—and then determining, with a very prudent fiscal-manager hat, which priorities get funded and which don't.

So it's something that we're looking at, for sure. We love our RPNs. We have about 30,000 of them in long-term care, so we'll continue looking at opportunities to really make them feel valued and appreciated.

MPP Tyler Watt: Thank you, Minister.

It came up—I think it was under my colleague MPP Gates—emergency room prevention. I love this. This is a great initiative that I would love to see even more investment in, because treating patients at their home, especially in long-term care, is not only better for the patients and their health, but it is significantly more cost-effective, right? It's far cheaper to diagnose and prevent or treat in long-term care than it is to send them to emerg where, as you said, I've seen that so many times: A patient comes in with dementia, delirium perhaps happens, and it's just not always the appropriate setting for them, unless it's a true emergency crisis.

So I would like you to expand on what initiatives have been taken for that emergency prevention, where that money is being spent and, perhaps, further plans that you have when it comes to prevention.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Great question. Our metrics are really showing great progress on those avoidable ED visits. One of the things that I'm very proud of is our NLOTs, our nurse practitioner-led outreach teams. We have about eight of them across the province of Ontario. These are hospital nurses, hospital nurse practitioners that are employed by the hospital, but then they work, in fact, with our long-term-care homes. They travel to our long-term-care homes to lend those specialized clinical supports. The homes, if they have a specific case, they will reach out, and they will get the NLOTs to come in. And many times, those nurse practitioners or registered nurses are able to respond to the clinical needs and even offer diagnostic tools etc. As a result, that resident does not need to be transferred into a long-term-care home. The community paramedics sort of do a similar but different job as well. The community paramedicine program has really helped us decrease those avoidable ED transfers as well by providing that specialized expert care, some diagnostic tools as well. So those are different things that we're looking at.

You know, my dream and my vision for the future would be to actually have mobile X-ray and mobile ultrasound for our long-term-care homes to access. When a resident experiences a fall and we need to make sure they

don't have any fractures, instead of that poor resident being loaded into that ambulance and again, going into hospitals, often through emergency room, into the diagnostic imaging departments, why not have these mobile X-ray supports come right to the resident? It could be one designated mobile X-ray team for a number of homes. Especially in the north, it could make such a huge difference.

So that's a vision for the future. It's something that we're working through. Of course, we would need to have buy-in from the Minister of Health, but we're having those conversations right now because, again, I think it's a huge win for both the resident and the system at large to have less residents coming into diagnostic imaging departments and getting their care right in the comfort of their own long-term-care home.

MPP Tyler Watt: I couldn't agree more on that. If you put that forward, I will vote to support that.

Again, I know it's an investment, though, but it ultimately is better for the patient, it's better for the health care workers and it's better for our bottom line when it comes to money, right? It will save us money in the end.

I'm always looking to make sure that we are advocating for and investing in those upstream prevention access approaches to health care. I think that there's a lot of opportunity in long-term care and, as I said, I love seeing a nurse at the helm of this because yes, this is this is what we need.

How much time do I have? Okay.

I quickly want to talk about some of your pilot programs. The dementia standards of practice—this is something that I really support as well. And having worked with the geriatric population my entire nursing career, primarily, besides when I'm sent off to emerg—bless your heart, by the way, for being a full-time ER nurse at one point in your career. Dementia care is so critical and important to the quality of care for that patient. It really does require a significant amount of training and practice, and we certainly need more of it across the entire health care system.

Now, would you mind talking a bit more about that pilot program? Are you seeing positive results from it and will you be proceeding with implementing it across the province at some point?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Great question. That's a \$9-million investment over three years. In the first iteration, it was about 17 homes. I believe this year we have another 15 homes that are coming online to implement emotion-based models of care. But I can tell you that outside of those homes that are specifically funded for this, many, many homes have taken it upon themselves, within the existing funding framework, to already implement the butterfly model or other emotional-based models of care. So it's possible to do even without the enhanced funding. Some homes just take the leadership and implement it themselves.

GPA training is very important. I actually became GPA-certified myself this summer with two of my team members from the ministry office.

MPP Tyler Watt: Gentle persuasive approach?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: That's right, gentle persuasive approaches. Boy, we need those in politics too, I would say.

MPP Tyler Watt: Amen.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: That's something that we're looking to fund through our BSOs and through other funding opportunities. So, yes, I would love to see every single home have an Improving Dementia Care Program, but realistically speaking, with limited funds, it may not be possible. But what each home does have is that BSO lead, that BSO support. We're currently reviewing BSO. It's a \$95-million investment. So, perhaps within that investment there are things we can do better and more targeted.

This summer, I actually did seven shifts at the specialized dementia unit at the Toronto Rehab, where I've learned just so much, just hands-on, about what it takes to take care of someone living with dementia who has serious behavioural and psychosocial symptoms of dementia. And there's some incredible work that's happening at UHN. Perhaps there are some learning opportunities and some best practices that we could take from that environment and apply it in long-term care.

It was a great eye-opening experience and sometimes sad, but necessary to really understand those needs.

MPP Tyler Watt: Yes, absolutely. And frankly, I'd actually like to see this taken up by the Ministry of Health as well, right? We talk about the need for caregiver support as well, and this is something that could really benefit in any health care system. Whether it's at the hospital, in the community, at home with caregivers, I think that this would be really beneficial.

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Inspections and enforcement: I know that inspections and enforcement have been an important priority for you. It was quite abysmal back in 2019, and you have made significant progress. Can you speak to the progress that the ministry has made in strengthening the inspections and oversight in long-term-care homes? Also, what are you seeing in terms of compliance?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: As I said, we have doubled the number of our inspectors, with a \$72.3-million investment. We also have that specialized investigations unit.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: We have a new program called CARES, through which our inspectors use an IT-based solution so that the standards are the same across the province.

Deputy, can you speak to that new compliance assistance program?

Mr. Peter Kaftarian: There has been a tremendous push under the leadership of Sandra Lawson, who is ADM, and the team on a transition away from the ministry coming in and it's potentially combative, to a compliance-assistance focus in order to see, "How can we help make this better?"—as opposed to gotcha moments. During the tail end of the pandemic, there was a lot of pressure, but there's now an evolution. When I go on tours of homes, I

ask them all if they are seeing a change, and the majority are. They're seeing a real shift with the helpfulness of the inspectors coming in, as opposed to, they notice something else and they immediately turn it into a negative—it's more of a "We need to do better." There are certain things in AMPs—we talked about AMPs earlier—that are still getting issued. But the opportunity to train—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you very much.

We'll now go on to the independent member for five minutes. I recognize MPP Clancy.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I wanted to put some attention on small care homes.

Your ministry is the most regulated, I think, in the whole government, and my worry is that we have this baby boom but then we'll have a baby bust, so we're going to be left with all this infrastructure that is highly clinical and challenging to transition to something else.

In Alberta, they're spending \$654 million to fund 400 homes that are situated in neighbourhoods—they're more like a big house. It makes it more comfortable and cheaper for residents, and those homes can be transitioned to another purpose after they might not be needed.

Is your ministry looking into this model of building additional beds and looking at the red tape in the ministry, to take down some of the costs of building new beds?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: It's certainly something we looked at, and we, in fact, had a couple, or maybe three, proposals from different proponents. But the challenge there is that if it's going to be called long-term care, it still needs to meet the regulatory requirements and be in compliance. So far, we haven't had anyone who can come forward with an appropriate staffing model that would work in a smaller home. In bigger homes, there are economies of scale. And there's a certain number of RNs and RPNs who are required to be in a long-term-care home. On a smaller scale, the funding model would not be sufficient to actually meet the regulatory and compliance requirements for it to be called a long-term-care home. So we asked for proposals and we received a few, but no one was able to really answer the question, "What would the staffing model look like?" If there are other jurisdictions that have done this successfully, I would really welcome—but to date, this has proven to be a little challenging.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: From my understanding, in Alberta, it's being used quite widely. I think we all need to be concerned about stranded assets once the baby boom is over. In 10 to 15 years, we could see a very different demographic picture. What will we be using those beds for when we don't have the same population that needs them? So I would encourage you to look at the model in Alberta. I do think that maybe there's room for red tape reduction, as you like to call it, in your ministry.

The other area I would like to ask you a question about is staffing. Some 90% of homes surveyed in 2025 faced challenges filling RPN shifts and 33% faced challenges in filling RN shifts. I know that there are some bad actors. Southbridge Care Homes tends to have many homes in the bottom 10 when it comes to staffing levels. So, two things: Is this a red flag for you, and what are you doing to hold

bad actors like Southbridge accountable when it comes to low staffing ratios?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Great question. I think you're referring to agency use in our system, and I can tell you quite confidently that our agency use has gone down year over year. We encourage our homes to, of course, hire permanent or part-time staff rather than rely on agencies.

We have funded a model with Schlegel Villages to help us understand these staffing ratios, and they have something called dedicated support, where they always try to match the same PSW to the same resident. So that work is ongoing and hopefully we can have some bigger lessons learned for the system at large.

Certainly, there are some homes which struggle at times to meet those four hours of care.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: But, by and large, I would say quite confidently that agency use has gone down quite significantly over the last four years.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Awesome. I guess, in future, I would like to hear more about your efforts to address the concerns about Southbridge in particular, if that's okay.

I come from an area that's full of health innovation. Just a little feedback from start-ups is that they have a lot of great technology to help prevent wounds before they begin; many different ways of keeping track of equipment so we don't lose money that way. But they find it impossible to get procurement bids through our Ministry of Health, especially things to be funded under OHIP.

Will you make efforts to make a flexible model so that small and medium start-ups can bring more innovation into the sector?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: I can only speak to the Ministry of Long-Term Care, but I think the innovation that's happening in the wound care space is amazing, especially with the use of AI and other technologies—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

We will now go to the government side and I recognize MPP Pierre. You have 13 minutes and 54 seconds.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: I'm going to ask you the same question that I did just before we went through the rotation—but I'll repeat it. It was around operational care and operational funding for long-term-care homes in the province. We know the homes our government is building, and we're working hard with our post-secondary education partners and some career laddering and some investments in continuing education for existing staff at long-term-care homes. But what we're hearing is homes still need to provide a safe and comfortable environment for the residents who live there.

I'm just hoping you could explain to the committee some of the investments that your ministry is making to ensure that every long-term-care home in the province has the operational funding that they need to provide the high level of care that residents deserve.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Great question. As I referenced earlier, the \$4.9-billion investment over the last five years that has helped us to hire and recruit 16,000

more staff was significant, which now resulted in a \$2-billion ongoing annual funding to make sure, now that we've reached those four hours of care, that we don't slip. So that's a \$2-billion investment.

If we break it down year over year—operational funding support:

—we've made a \$353-million increase to annual level-of-care funding starting in 2024-25, which was the largest year-over-year increase in more than 20 years—so that was significant;

—an additional \$96-million annual increase starting in 2025-26; and then

—this next fiscal, for 2026-27, there will be an additional \$140 million to direct support resident care, including specialized care programs and meals.

As well, we have a fund called a High Intensity Needs Fund. When we have a resident that's coming into a long-term-care home that has very specific needs, whether they're bariatric or there might be other needs that cost a lot of money, the home can apply to really help support the care of that specific resident. Or they may be a couple in a home that require that higher level of support, which costs a lot of money. So we do have this fund available to those homes to make sure that caring for one individual with very complex and costly needs doesn't impact the care of others. That's another way we're ensuring that we're very responsive to the local and real-time-oriented needs of our residents.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: Thank you.

I also just wanted to provide you with a bit of feedback. You were talking about the Living Classroom earlier and about some of the work-integrated programs that you're working with post-secondary. I've had fantastic feedback from residents, fantastic feedback from staff in long-term-care homes and fantastic feedback from the post-secondary institutions, who are looking for more of that, I would say. It was interesting, when you were talking about the retention—you're having graduates now being placed in long-term-care homes, and that kind of realistic job preview that they get embedded into their school curriculum really helps solidify the path forward; you don't see people exiting because they understand, and they're given the ability to apply what they learn. So I just wanted to give you a shout-out and thank you for that. Keep up the good work.

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I'll pass it over to my colleague.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Racinsky.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you, Minister, for speaking with the committee this afternoon. You and your staff must be doing an excellent job. We've got MPP Gates with a smile on his face, the Liberal Party congratulating you on your progress, and the Green Party talking about red tape reduction. So this has been a wonderful afternoon.

I also want to thank you for supporting the additional 32-bed allocation funding for Bennett Village in Georgetown, a not-for-profit long-term-care home, in addition to the over 120 new beds for their new site on Halton Hills

Drive. It's a very exciting project in my community. They launched the capital campaign for that project last week, and they're hoping to have shovels in the ground next year. Thank you for your support on that.

Last week was long-term-care engagement day. I visited Caressant Care in Fergus and Extendicare in Georgetown, and something I heard from the staff there was the need and the importance of modernization—the technology that they have and its increasingly important role in improving resident care, streamlining operations.

I know you mentioned in your opening remarks the integrated technology solutions program and investments in medication safety systems. I want to ask how your ministry is supporting homes in adopting these new technologies. What impact do you anticipate these innovations will have on resident outcomes and staff workflows?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: We put that money to very good use through the technologies fund that's available. Specifically, the medication reconciliation and improved practices for medication administration came out from the Gillespie report, so it was very, very important that we act on it and we act on it quickly. What became very clear is that we need to become better at managing medication administration and tracking of those medications across our long-term-care homes. That fund is really supporting the use of that technology, and it has been implemented quite well. When I visit long-term-care homes, I see those cubbies with those electronic dispensing modules etc. I think our staff are a lot more confident now, thanks to the use of that technology and additional training, when they dispense medications.

We also have a program called medication assist, through which our PSWs are trained—not all, but some who have aptitude and talent and interest in becoming specialized. They're trained on actually administering certain types of medications—of course, not all, but the lower-risk medications. What we've seen is, in the homes that implement this PSW-assist program, not only are the PSWs very happy because they are now evolving their role; those RPNs who—we know they have to medicate a lot of long-term-care residents in their shift. They're very, very happy that they're now able to have another health care worker assist them in that.

Really, what I would like to focus this next year on is the implementation of some AI solutions. My other PA, MPP Dawn Gallagher Murphy, has been doing some really good work to bring forward some of the AI solutions that potentially could be implemented in long-term care; and there are many, in the area of wound care, in the area of medication management—also, deprescribing. We know some of our residents are on 30, 40 different medications, and boy, could we deprescribe some of those. When you're 95 years old, maybe you don't need to be on 30 medications every day. So that's some of the work that's ongoing. I'm really looking forward to implementing some of those solutions and being at the forefront of the AI revolution that's coming and that's here already.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Going back to your earlier conversation that was going on about culturally diverse

homes, in my constituency, there's a large Croatian or eastern European, generally, population, and so that's important for even my community in Wellington–Halton Hills. I was wondering if you could speak more to what your ministry is doing to ensure that long-term-care homes can provide culturally appropriate care in the province of Ontario.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: First of all, we have to help them build and develop, and so I'm so proud that we have so many projects currently under construction that have a cultural component. For example, Generations Toronto is a specific home for the Muslim community. We have a Coptic home that's being built in Mississauga. We have a new Ukrainian home as well that's being built in Mississauga, and I'm sure there are many others that I just cannot remember off top of my head.

It's really important that we encourage that and that we provide all the same tools that we provide to everyone else but specifically to those homes to help them succeed. I know many of you have come forward with your ideas. I think there's a Hellenic home that's currently in progress as well.

It's so important that we're able to service those seniors in their language. When I visit homes that have the cultural and ethnic component and I see the joy, the life, the culture, the food and everything that's reflected, it just reminds me how amazing Ontario is, because diversity is our strength.

I can tell you some of the staff use Duolingo to learn some of the languages, and so one of the things I'm considering is perhaps having a small fund to actually allow staff to take some basic lessons in a language to help support the residents in their care.

Absolutely, we're growing our repertoire of cultural homes across the province. If there are any members that know of groups that want to come together to put in an application, now is the time to do it.

Mr. Joseph Racinsky: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Jordan.

Mr. John Jordan: Thank you again, Minister. One of the things that we know is, residents are coming into long-term care later in life—more complex issues. Can you speak to some of the programs, whether it's dementia or behaviour, that your ministry has put in place, but also how we're preparing staff for that different complexity within our long-term-care homes?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Great question. That's precisely why I went into Toronto Rehab this summer, to learn a little bit more about how to care for those living with dementia, especially those who have more responsive behaviours or psychosocial symptoms of dementia.

Our BSUs, our behavioural support units, are doing a great job. They're specialized units, and they're funded at a higher level. They receive extra per diem to be able to respond to those needs. That means the staffing levels are higher in those specific units, and the staff that work in those units receive specialized training. I think there is more work that we need to do with our system partners like, for example, UHN and others who are leaders in this field.

The behavioural specialized unit that's here at Toronto Rehab, they're actually like a step-up unit, where if local long-term-care homes are unable to manage a resident, they are then transferred into Toronto Rehab, into the specialized dementia unit for a period of about six weeks. They get specialized treatment. They get titration of their medications because sometimes it's the medications that are causing those behaviours. They have access to behavioural therapists, social work, recreation to really try to manage those behaviours and bring them to a level where those residents can then go back to their long-term-care home and be able to live successfully, hopefully with a much lower level of behaviours in those homes.

So learning from those specialized units that we have, those best practices, and how we can implement those in long-term care—of course, they have much higher staffing levels in this dementia unit than we could ever have in long-term care, but I think there are some best practices that we can learn from and then apply in long-term care to really give our staff the tools, resources and training they need to deal with these potentially escalating situations at times.

Mr. John Jordan: Thank you, Minister.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Further questions? MPP Pang.

Mr. Billy Pang: I just want to follow up on the previous question on diversity. You have visited my riding already. In my riding, when I was first elected in 2018, 56% of my riding was visible minorities—now over 70%.

So for the diversity direction, what are more policies that you are thinking of there so that we can help? Because many of the seniors don't have the dialect. The food is different. There are a lot of differences from the mainstream.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Mr. Billy Pang: Any policies that are being developed or worked on there, so that we can support this majority in my riding?

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Yes. As I said, we are expanding the number of culturally appropriate homes that we're building across the province. But for every single one of our residents, we do require a plan of care that homes have to put forward. Part of the plan of care is to ensure that residents' needs are met. Those needs could be cultural, could be spiritual, could be dietary, so homes are expected to do whatever effort possible to ensure that, holistically, all the needs, including the cultural needs of those residents, are met.

I know that homes that are maybe not culturally designated still offer programming. If they see there is a large number of residents of a certain culture, they will offer programming specific to that culture. We're seeing homes step up and actually do that work, and they celebrate—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

This concludes the committee's consideration of estimates of the Ministry of Long-Term Care. Standing order 69 requires that the Chair put, without further amendment

or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates. Are members ready to vote?

Shall vote 4501, ministry administration program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

Shall 4502, long-term-care home programs, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

Shall the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of Long-Term Care carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of Long-Term Care to the House? All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

This concludes our consideration of estimates of the Ministry of Long-Term Care. I would like to thank the minister for her time today and her enlightenment, and I'd like to thank her officials that came and her staff. Thank you so much.

Hon. Natalia Kusendova-Bashta: Thank you, everyone. Thank you so much.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): This concludes it. We are now recessed to 3:30.

The committee recessed from 1502 to 1530.

MINISTRY OF COLLEGES, UNIVERSITIES, RESEARCH EXCELLENCE AND SECURITY

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Good afternoon, everyone. The Standing Committee for Social Policy will now come to order. We are meeting to consider the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security for a total of three hours.

From the ministry, we're joined by the Honourable Nolan Quinn, the deputy, ministry officials and staff. As a reminder, the ministry is required to monitor the proceedings for any questions or issues that the ministry undertakes to address.

Are there any questions before we start?

I am now required to call vote 3001, which sets the review process in motion. We will now begin with a statement of not more than 20 minutes from the minister.

Minister, the floor is yours.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Well, good afternoon everyone.

As Minister of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security, I have the privilege of working with the very best post-secondary and research institutions in the world. Every day, our colleges, universities, Indigenous institutes and research institutions are preparing the workforce of tomorrow, driving groundbreaking discoveries and creating the opportunities that will keep Ontario strong for generations to come.

We're meeting at a very important moment for our province. Ontario's economy is changing quickly, new technologies are transforming how we live and how we work, and global uncertainty continues to challenge our businesses and industries and tariffs threaten Ontario workers, families and communities. But with every challenge comes opportunity, and our government is making

sure Ontario has the people, the skills and the innovation necessary to seize those opportunities.

Our post-secondary institutions are at the centre of protecting our workers, our critical businesses and Ontario. They are where we are educating the next life-saving surgeon, the next AI innovator, the next teacher, the next skilled tradesperson and the next generation of workers who will take our province to new heights, which is why our government continues to make the critical investments to strengthen our institutions, expand opportunity for students and ensure our post-secondary sector remains sustainable for decades to come.

Earlier this year, our government took that work to an entirely new level. Through our new long-term funding model, we're investing an additional \$6.4 billion of funding for the Ontario post-secondary sector, the largest investment in post-secondary education in Ontario and Canadian history.

Starting this academic year, our new funding model will provide \$7 billion in annual operating funding to this sector. That represents a 30% increase over last year's funding and, most importantly, it gives our colleges, universities and Indigenous institutes the predictable, sustainable funding they need to provide a world-class education, because our government knows that strong institutions create strong students, strong students create a strong workforce and a strong workforce creates a strong Ontario.

That's why, through our new long-term funding model, we're investing \$1.7 billion toward funding over 70,000 more seats in high-demand programs like STEM, health care, education and the trades. Specifically, we're funding 40,200 more seats in STEM programs, 16,100 seats in health care programs, 7,900 more seats in education programs and 3,800 more seats in trade programs, as well as 3,000 more seats in other labour-market driven programs.

We're expanding the programs students want to create the workforce Ontario needs, and the impact is wide-reaching. In northern Ontario, we're adding 4,200 more seats; in central Ontario, 22,900 seats; 11,800 seats in my neck of the province, eastern Ontario; 8,500 seats in southwestern Ontario; and 23,600 more seats in the GTA. This historic long-term funding model will sustain the sector for future generations, supporting world-class education and ensuring Ontario students will always graduate, ready to protect Ontario's economy with good-paying jobs no matter what we may face.

But our work doesn't stop there. This new funding model also includes specialized funding to better meet the needs of small, rural, northern and French-language institutions, with \$284 million in additional funding to support these institutions. For students, this means more choice and clearer pathways to programs that lead directly to good-paying jobs in the communities where they grew up.

I've spent a lot of time on campuses over the past couple of years in this role, and I can tell you from first-hand experience that Ontario's students are ambitious, bright and ready to lead. Education opens doors to opportunity, good-paying jobs and meaningful careers. That means we need to make sure what students learn lines up

with what employers need, and that's exactly what our new funding model does.

Our support for STEM education is a perfect example. Technology, advanced manufacturing, life sciences and engineering are transforming Ontario's economy. And we need the highly skilled workers to drive those industries forward. That's why, in 2025, our government invested \$750 million to support STEM programs at colleges and universities. This investment will fund 20,500 STEM seats each year, enabling students to prepare for cutting-edge fields and access programs tied to high-growth industries. Whether a student wants to become a software developer, an engineer, a lab technician or a data specialist, these investments ensure the door is wide open. Our new funding model builds on this investment even further.

As a father of three young children and a husband to an incredible teacher, I see first-hand the impact incredible teachers have on our kids. Strong teachers give students the foundations they need to become the leaders of tomorrow. That's why, effective May 2027, all Ontario faculties of education will offer a 12-month or three-consecutive-semester teaching program, transitioning from the current two-year program model. Our government is breaking down barriers to launching this rewarding career, getting students into classrooms faster, without compromising the quality of teachers for our children.

To keep our teaching pipeline strong, as I mentioned earlier, a \$1.7-billion investment is adding nearly 8,000 more teaching seats. That includes spaces in French language programs, rural and Indigenous communities, ensuring needs are met across the whole province. This builds on our 2025 investment of nearly \$56 million to train 2,600 more teachers in Ontario. Through these actions we're creating a teacher education system that is more responsive, more accessible and more closely aligned with the realities of today's classrooms; a system that supports educators at every stage, strengthens learning for every student and positions Ontario as a leader in high-quality, forward-looking teacher preparation.

Our province is growing fast. We are building new homes, highways, hospitals, transit and critical infrastructure across Ontario. In order to build Ontario, we need a highly skilled, made-in-Ontario workforce to get it done for our province. This is why, last year, our government invested \$75 million to expand enrolment in construction-related programs at colleges, universities, and Indigenous institutes across the province.

This critical investment will expand enrolment by 7,800 seats, enabling students to train for in-demand careers such as urban and land-use planners, electrical engineering technicians and other careers that play a key role in building a stronger Ontario. In order to protect Ontario, we must keep building Ontario. Students supported by this investment will build the homes, highways, hospitals and other critical infrastructure of tomorrow, strengthening what makes Ontario an incredible place to call home. And with the additional 3,800 trade seats funded through the new funding model, we're ensuring Ontario has the skilled workers today and for decades to come.

Like all other labour markets across Ontario, our government is building a strong and resilient health care workforce. We're working to connect people in every corner of the province with convenient, high-quality health care close to home. But in order to do that, we need the nurses, doctors and health care professionals to deliver that care.

Health care workers are the backbone of our province, and nurses play a critical role at every level of care. Their work is essential and their impact is felt by so many across this province, especially in our hospitals, long-term-care homes, community health centres and primary care clinics. That's why our government invested \$56.8 million in 2025 to add 2,200 new nursing education spaces across publicly assisted colleges and universities. This means more opportunities for students to enter a rewarding career in nursing and more highly trained nurses serving patients and communities across Ontario.

We're also strengthening the pipeline of family doctors who will provide primary care to Ontario families for generations to come. Our government is investing \$55.8 million to York University's new School of Medicine. As Ontario's first medical school focused on training family doctors, York will prepare more highly skilled physicians to serve communities across the province. When fully operational, the school will support 240 undergraduate and 293 postgraduate medical seats.

York will be the second new medical school opened by our government. Last fall, Toronto Metropolitan University opened their medical school in Brampton, supported by a \$180-million investment from our government. In their first year, TMU welcomed over 200 future doctors, strengthening our pipeline of highly skilled physicians even further.

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To further this work, last month, Minister Jones and I were proud to announce that starting this fall, our government is investing \$220 million to expand the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant to support future family physicians. Students in postgraduate family medicine residency programs can apply to have their undergraduate medical education retroactively covered, including tuition, books and other educational costs. In return, they'll practice family medicine anywhere in Ontario after graduation for at least five years. Together, with our support for nursing education, these investments are strengthening the health care workforce, giving students access to rewarding careers and ensuring Ontario families can access the excellent care they deserve.

Our government is building a stronger Ontario by ensuring every learner has a path to opportunity. Indigenous youth are the fastest growing part of our workforce. In fact, enrolment in Indigenous institutes has increased by 36% over the last five years, meaning we have more capable and job-ready students ready to enter the workforce and hit the ground running after graduation. Every day across the province, Indigenous institutes are building the next generation of workers who will strengthen their communities and drive their economy. Whether it's training the next nurse, entrepreneur, electrician or educa-

tor, these institutes are equipping students with the skills to thrive in their future and launch meaningful, in-demand careers.

That's why, as part of our \$6.4-billion investment, our government is investing a historic \$57 million in additional funding to strengthen the nine Indigenous institutes in Ontario. This additional investment will bring our operating funding for Indigenous institutes up to \$50 million per year by 2028-29, the highest level in Ontario's history. This includes up to \$33 million to open hundreds of new seats in key labour-market-driven programs like health care, education, skilled trades, STEM and Indigenous languages and studies, expanding the programs students want and building the workforce Indigenous communities need.

Our government knows that when we invest in Indigenous institutes, we invest in our industries, we invest in our communities and we invest in a thriving province. With this historic funding, we're ensuring Indigenous learners graduate ready to protect our economy and support their communities.

Alongside strengthening Indigenous institutes, we're also creating targeted opportunities that connect First Nations learners directly to Ontario's fastest growing industries. That's why we're investing \$10 million to create new scholarship opportunities for First Nations learners enrolled in mining and resource development programs. Critical minerals are essential to everything from electric vehicles to clean energy, from batteries to telecommunications and medical devices.

Ontario's potential in the critical mineral space, along with its labour market opportunities, is significant. To support this, new scholarships will provide full, upfront funding for direct educational costs, including tuition and books, as well as up to \$2,500 per student to address the unique needs of First Nation students, enabling them to gain access to the tools and training needed to succeed as leaders and innovators in this sector, whether as geologists, environmental scientists, engineers or entrepreneurs building Indigenous-owned businesses. And more importantly, they'll be able to bring the benefits of those careers back home to their communities.

This is how we build a workforce that's not only skilled, but resilient to global pressures. By developing local talent, we're protecting Ontario from the economic shocks of tariffs and trade disruptions and ensuring that local communities can build their own success.

As we take steps to protect Ontario amid economic uncertainty, our government is also making critical investments to strengthen access to French-language education. Our French-language post-secondary system is the largest in Canada outside of Quebec, with about 37,000 students enrolled in high-quality French-language and bilingual programs at institutions across Ontario. That's why, as part of our new funding model, Ontario is investing \$11 million more annually in French-language grants to ensure our students and schools can keep delivering a world-class French education that builds a highly skilled, bilingual workforce for Ontario.

Combined, our small, rural, northern and French-language institutions will now receive a total of \$1.2 billion in specialized funding. Through this investment, we're ensuring francophone students have access to high-quality education that will launch them into good-paying, in-demand jobs that will strengthen Ontario's economy.

In addition to our world-class post-secondary sector, as the minister who oversees research excellence and security in Ontario, I'm incredibly proud of the groundbreaking research happening in our province. Ontario is home to the brightest researchers in the world. Whether it's life-saving cancer research, advancing manufacturing through innovation or unlocking clean energy potential, our researchers are building a strong, more self-reliant province.

Across critical sectors like agriculture, AI and life sciences, our researchers are building a brighter future for Ontario; a future where we live longer, healthier lives, where our businesses stay on the forefront of innovation and where Ontario continues to lead globally in economy-driving sectors.

To turn that vision into reality, our government is making strategic investments to strengthen research excellence across the province. Since we have taken office, we've invested more than \$2 billion in home-grown research, including over 1,800 research projects through the Ontario Research Fund and Early Researcher Award programs.

We're continuing to build on that work. Beginning in 2026-27, our government is providing an additional \$117 million for critical research infrastructure, bringing the total funding to \$338 million. This investment will modernize laboratories across Ontario, help them purchase cutting-edge research tools, and attract the world-class researchers our province needs to remain globally competitive.

We're also investing \$14 million to support the ongoing operations of SNOLAB, a world-leading, underground science laboratory advancing breakthrough discoveries in physics.

To ensure researchers have the critical digital infrastructure they need, we're providing an additional \$4 million to continue supporting Compute Ontario, which coordinates advanced research computing systems across the province, giving researchers access to the tools necessary to compete at the highest level.

Last year, we also announced a \$19.5-million investment to establish the new centre of excellence for fusion energy, positioning Ontario at the forefront of clean energy innovation.

And we're putting an additional \$17 million towards increasing production of life-saving medical isotopes at the McMaster nuclear reactor. This builds on previous investments of \$9.8 million, bringing the total investment to \$26.9 million. This investment will support the future expansion of its operations to run 24 hours a day, seven days a week, significantly increasing the supply of life-saving medical isotopes, enabling up to 84,000 cancer treatments each year.

Together, these investments show that with each dollar spent and every discovery made, we're protecting On-

tario's future. Because it's not enough to be competitive today; we have to stay competitive for tomorrow, and research is how we do that.

I've covered a lot today, but whether we're talking about expanding seats, training nurses and teachers, supporting Indigenous and francophone learners, or funding groundbreaking research, it all comes back to one thing: protecting Ontario.

There's no smarter investment we can make than backing the talent, skills and potential of the next generation. From STEM talent to trade workers, to teachers, to health care professionals Ontario families rely on every day, we're making sure students across Ontario can succeed and our economy remains competitive in a fast-changing world. Everything we're doing is about building a workforce that will keep Ontario's industries and communities strong now and into the next decade.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Our investments are opening doors to high-quality education, to skills that lead to rewarding, meaningful careers and to world-class research and innovation.

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This has been a record-setting year for our sector; a year that has marked a new era of long-term sustainability and measured strategic growth, with a laser focus on our core mandate: equipping students to thrive in their future careers.

I look forward to continuing this work alongside our colleges, universities, Indigenous institutes and researchers across the province as we build on this momentum together. Together, we'll keep building a strong Ontario and creating opportunity in every corner of the province for the people who live here and the businesses that invest here. Thank you, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You have 12 seconds left. Thank you for your presentation.

We will now begin questions and answers in rotation of 15 minutes for the official opposition members, 15 minutes for the third party, five minutes for the independent member and 15 minutes for the government members. As always, please remember to make your comments through the Chair.

In the past, members have been allowed to ask a wide range of questions pertaining to estimates before the committee. However, it must be noted that the onus is on the members asking questions to make sure the question is relevant to the estimates under consideration.

For any ministry staff appearing, please state your name and title when you're called upon to speak so we can record it.

I will now start with the official opposition, and I recognize MPP Sattler.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you very much, Chair, and thank you to the minister for that presentation.

I am going to begin my questioning with OSAP, which is included in vote item 3002-1 and 3002-4.

So the OSAP program has shifted from a system that was based mostly on grants, to one that is now based mostly on loans. We see that reflected in the estimates document, but this change really means that about 69% of this new funding that's been allocated to the sector is actually coming off the backs of low- and moderate-income students. We saw this last week with the FAO report. OSAP grants are going to decline from about \$5,900 for college students to just \$2,300, from an average of \$4,200 for university students to just \$1,700.

My question is, when the minister was deciding on this policy change for OSAP, was there any analysis of the amount of additional debt that students will be forced to carry as a result of these changes and what this will mean for access? We know that Ontario tuition rates remain among the highest in Canada and will now be increasing as a result of another change made by the ministry.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Thank you, MPP Sattler, for the question. I think I'll start with the tuition comment. It was our government that froze tuition in 2019 and reduced it by 10%, recognizing that we had the highest tuition in Canada. We have frozen the tuition over the last eight years, but I think everyone in this committee understands the sector has changed significantly since the federal government has made unilateral changes to the international student allocation for all of Canada, not just Ontario.

But it's worth noting that the Auditor General in 2018 clearly articulated that the changes the previous government made to the grant-to-loan ratio were unsustainable, and it would create billions of dollars of pressure on the system and that's what we're dealing with right now.

Our government wants to ensure that OSAP is not just here for today's students, but for the next generation of students that are behind them as well.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you very much for that response, and I appreciate the reference to the 2018 Auditor General's report about the sustainability of the OSAP program.

When you look at the data, the distribution of OSAP grants versus loans, we saw that by three years after the auditor's report in 2018, so by 2021, the proportion of grants versus loans for public college and university students had pretty much returned to where it was before there was that spike.

But we did see increasing access for OSAP grants from private career college students. There was some pretty shocking data that was recently shared through freedom of information, showing an explosive growth in OSAP due almost entirely to a handful of private career colleges. Last year, private career college students were receiving almost a billion dollars in OSAP grants, with average grants of \$13,000. That's much more than college and university students combined. So it should have been obvious to the ministry, the minister, that there was a big problem with private career college students accessing OSAP grants. There was a 1,300% increase at one private career college. There was a 2,700% increase in the number of students receiving grants in that period from 2021 to 2025.

I know that concerns were raised with ministry officials in January 2023 by Career Colleges Ontario about this overuse of OSAP grants. So why was this not flagged immediately and why did the ministry not take corrective action at that time?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Well, thank you. I think it's worth noting that we're constantly reviewing the OSAP program to understand the different needs of our learners.

I think a lot of your concerns revolve around the time of COVID, when learners' needs had changed and there was significant duress across Canada when it comes to employment. Understanding that career colleges do offer flexible formats over nights and weekends and shorter-duration training opportunities for our students, as well as year-round intakes to their programming, as well as—I'd already mentioned accelerated programming, but understanding the growth in enrolment across all of OSAP; just this fall we're seeing an increase in domestic enrolment, both at colleges and universities. And understanding the pressure that the Auditor General did articulate in 2018—we're understanding the pressures of that, because the other thing that I think we needed to take into consideration is the assessed needs of our learners. Higher levels of needs have been articulated over the last couple of years. The demographics of our learners have changed, and it's put more pressure on OSAP.

We want to ensure OSAP is sustainable for not just this generation, but for the next generation. I think it's worth reminding the member that one of the changes we made in February that changes the grant-to-loan ratio is changing the private career colleges to 100% loan moving forward.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Yes, I am aware of that change. My concern is that there were numerous red flags raised over a long period of time, and the situation got seriously out of control before the ministry did anything to address it.

The other question I have for the minister is: What other policy options were considered to deal with this pressure on OSAP grants? The minister chose the option of penalizing all students, including those in public colleges and universities, and reducing their access to grants, instead of looking at other ways to fix the problem. In Alberta, they have caps on the amount of financial aid that private career colleges can access when there is increased usage—or maybe even look at ending grants for private career college students. Instead, we see these across-the-board cuts for all students who need OSAP grants to go to post-secondary education. Can the minister tell us what other policy options were considered and why they decided to penalize all post-secondary students in the province?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Well, I think it's worth noting that we have zero tolerance for bad actors. Anyone who threatens the integrity of your post-secondary system, we take those very seriously and we're very thorough with our investigations. We act on the concerns or allegations. But we do need to recognize that they are allegations, and we need to do a thorough investigation before we act upon the information that's provided to us.

With reference to the grant-to-loan ratio, I think it is also worth noting that OSAP flows directly to the students, because I think you made reference to Alberta capping career colleges. We don't define where students are going to choose to go to school. We support the students in their choice to go to a career college or a publicly assisted institution in that regard.

But recognizing we want to ensure OSAP sustainability is there, we made the changes that were required. As I've already stated, the Auditor General, in 2018, articulated that the drastic changes—from 15% grants up to 85% grants—were going to cause significant sustainability problems and it was unsustainable. So we had to act, understanding, as I mentioned earlier, that we've already seen domestic enrolment go up this year and in the years to come we do see domestic enrolment of youth going into post-secondary increasing significantly. We want to ensure that OSAP is sustainable, as I've mentioned already, not just for today's students, but the next generation of students behind them, because this is a program that ensures accessibility to post-secondary.

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Ms. Peggy Sattler: But there were other policy options that the minister could have considered. I haven't heard an explanation as to why they determined that cutting OSAP grants across the board was the right approach.

I want to go back to vote item 3002-4. Obviously, because of the changes that were made, there is a 378% increase in the amount of funding that is allocated to student loans—from \$631 million last year to \$3 billion this year—but the default amount remains the same, at \$500,000. So my question to the minister is whether there is any increase in default rates anticipated when so many more students are being forced to rely on loans, and what is the ministry planning to deal with the resources to track down non-repayment of loans and other administrative responsibilities that are associated with this huge increase in loans?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I think it's worth noting again, because the opposition always like to say we cut OSAP, that we have not cut OSAP. OSAP will be available for the students who need it.

I also think it's worth noting that the grant-to-loan ratio that we have implemented in Ontario—25% grant, 75% loan—is pretty consistent with other jurisdictions across Canada, including the NDP government in British Columbia and the NDP government in Manitoba, as well as being in line with the federal government's grant-to-loan ratios on the national student loans services.

When it comes to supports for students, we have the RAP program to ensure that students will always have the supports they need. I think it's also worth noting that we almost have \$2 billion worth of grants and bursaries at our colleges and universities across the province, as well as our enhanced Student Access Guarantee, or ESAG as we like to call it, that will ensure that the difference between the OSAP and the tuition increase will be made whole for qualified low-income students.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: The amount of funding that has been allocated to OSAP has actually decreased. Vote item 3002-1 shows a 17% reduction in the amount of funding that is allocated to student financial aid, from \$2.9 billion to \$2.4 billion this year. In addition to forcing more students to take on huge amounts of debt in order to attend post-secondary education, why did the minister decide to also reduce the amount of funding available?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Well, I think it's worth noting, when that member talks about huge numbers—I think during the five years of the NDP government, inflation was 16% and tuition went up 50%. During our time in government, over the eight years, we've seen significantly high inflation—higher than their five years in power—but we've held tuition flat over those eight years; we also reduced it by 10%. So when we're talking about affordability, it's our government that understands the affordability for students. During that freeze period of time, we saved, on average, \$1,800 per university student and \$450 per college student. Those savings will not only be felt by those students but will be continued to be felt in the next generation of students, because we flatlined the tuition growth in Ontario.

So I just want to say that if the NDP were in power right now, ultimately, tuition would be almost double what it is right now. History speaks for itself.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Chair, I would like to continue asking questions about OSAP and this shift from grants to loans.

We're now up to 75% of funding will be in the form of a loan. I did not see it in the estimates document, but I'm wondering if the minister's staff have estimated how much interest these new loans are going to be generating for the government and where in this document is this windfall that the government will now be able to benefit from? Where is that reflected in the ministry's estimates?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Chair, I think it's worth noting that the OSAP changes we have made are not going back to the OSAP of old in the early 2000s. I referenced my brother; he was the one in our family who was fortunate enough to receive OSAP out of the five children. He had OSAP loans of significantly high interest rates that he had to pay back right away because interest was accruing right away.

This new OSAP that we have since the early 2000s is zero interest while the student is in school and it's prime plus 1% after the student graduates. But there is a six-month grace period with no payments to ensure that the student is able to land on their feet and get the job that they need. Recognizing that this is an extraordinarily low rate of interest—it's prime plus 1%—it's not the OSAP of the early 2000s that was predatory interest rates on our students.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Chair, interest can be accrued. It's just not having to be paid as soon as the student completes their study. But I appreciate the response.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): We'll now move on to the third party and I recognize MPP Collard.

Mme Lucille Collard: Good afternoon, Minister. Thank you for your presentation. I've actually picked up on some

of the numbers you've just really rapidly fired at us, but it's on me to study it more deeply.

I want to talk about French teacher recruitment. There was a strategy that the government deployed for French teacher recruitment and retention that spanned from 2021 to 2025, and it must involve your ministry, as it recommends an increase in enrolment in French-language teachers.

I came back this afternoon because this morning I was with the Minister of Education, and he told me to ask you that question, because he didn't have the answer.

So I would like to know, from that strategy, how many spaces were created to train more French teachers? And, of this number, how many of those new spaces that were created once you got the number were actually filled? How many students graduated and how many of those graduated are now teaching in our French-language schools?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Thank you for that. Recognizing we in the ministry are tracking the students and their pathway—we are not tracking the retention at the Ministry of Education. But, understanding, I will pass it over to my deputy for a little bit more support on that one. I do have some answers later on—but recognizing we've seen almost a doubling of the amount of students, full-time equivalents, that are in French-language education training right now.

I'll pass it over to Deputy Wai to provide some of the—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Would you please move the mike closer to you and state your position and your name, please?

Mr. David Wai: David Wai, deputy minister, Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security.

As the minister indicated, we have had a number of increases in the spaces of teachers. In 2025-26, we invested about \$56 million over two years to create up to 2,600 new teacher spots. Of those, approximately 250 went to French-language B.Ed. programs and another 269 went to French-as-a-second-language programs.

In addition to those changes, we've also increased further enrollments within the Université de l'Ontario français. They are enabled now to accept up to 400 new students in their program.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: All right. So how many of those available spaces are filled? Do we have students that are occupying those seats?

Mr. David Wai: Yes, absolutely. Maybe I'll ask my assistant deputy minister, Didier Pomerleau, to come and provide more detail on that.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Okay. And if I can get the number of people that graduate from that program and that are actually teaching, that would be also helpful.

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Mr. Didier Pomerleau: With regard to teacher supply and retention in the French-language sector, I don't have the percentage of retention rate, but what I can say is that as part of the French-language teacher recruitment strategy, the province did three things to improve the situation. One was to increase the capacity in French-language edu-

cation teacher programs. So we've gone from 848 FTEs in 2021 to 1,763 FTEs last year. That's a tremendous increase. It's an increase of over 100% in the number of seats filled by students in faculties of education in French-language programs.

The second thing that the province did—and this one is a little out of scope; it's more of a Ministry of Education activity—the province recruited over 350 internationally trained teachers to join the system in the French-language school board system.

The third thing that the province did is provide school boards with \$100,000 each in funding—the French-language school boards, sorry—to improve retention amongst its existing teachers. Mentoring programs, coaching programs, paying for additional qualifications for new teachers as they upgrade their skill set—that was done too.

What is the result of these initiatives? We measure teacher supply shortages through the number of letters of permission, which are letters issued to teachers who are not certified by the College of Teachers. The individuals who hold letters of permission has declined from 646 in 2021-22, when the French-language strategy was rolled out, to 450 in 2024-25—

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Sorry, what was the number? The comparison of those numbers?

Mr. Didier Pomerleau: To 450 in 2024-25—

M^{me} Lucille Collard: From?

Mr. Didier Pomerleau: From a high of 646 three years before. These are individuals that have letters of permission, rather than total number of letters of permission because some individuals hold multiple letters; 2024-25 is the latest year that we have robust data, but we anticipate a continuation of this trend last year and this year as well.

Generally, it's had a very positive impact, the strategy, and we expect further improvements from the rollout of the reduction in length of the initial teacher program to a 12-month format, and this will further accelerate the 30% drop in the gap.

M^{me} Lucille Collard: Yes, something I've been asking for for a number of years. I'm glad that it's finally a fait accompli and that we will eventually benefit from that change. So thank you for that.

As a follow-up question, the working group that put forward the recommendations that inform the strategy projected that the demand in Ontario would need to produce 520 more French-language teachers annually over the following five years, in addition to the approximately 500 that are entering the profession from teachers' colleges annually.

We're talking about, here, that we need 1,020 new teachers per year, and even with the increased seats that have been funded across French-language teachers' colleges, the maximum number of teachers graduating annually will be approximately 800, if my calculation is right. What are you doing to reach that 1,020 teachers that are needed in our schools?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Before I pass it over to the ADM, I think it's worth noting, as you reference, we've just gone down to a 12-month, three-term consecutive, so we're

shortening the length of teacher education. But it's also worth noting that in the last five years, we've doubled the amount of French teachers that are currently going through the training program; specifically at UOF, we've seen significant growth.

With reference to your 500 graduates per year, we have ramped it up and we're going to see the fruits of our labour in the coming years. But it's also worth noting, in budget 2025, we added another 2,600 teaching spots. And they're not spots that are funded; they're spots that are filled.

I'll pass it over to the ADM to share some further details.

Mr. Didier Pomerleau: Of the 107% growth in number of seats in faculties of education French programs, the majority of that increase is from the launch of the Université de l'Ontario français faculty of education. They've been able to really grow the capacity in southern Ontario, because most of the capacity before, in French programs, had been in eastern and northern Ontario. So now we've got a tri-regional strategy to help things. The number of annual graduates from these programs is, of course, increasing alongside with the number of seats. The number of graduates will further increase, as the minister said, with regard to shortening to a 12-month program—

Mme Lucille Collard: Do you have those numbers about those who are taking those seats and the percentage that is graduating? If you don't have an exact number, what's a proportion?

Mr. Didier Pomerleau: I don't have an exact number, but a very rough rule of thumb is you take the overall number of FTEs, which I've said is 1,763, and you multiply that by about 0.4, and that should be the rough amount that graduates each year.

Now, so far, that's enabled us to reduce the shortage. But you're right, there are bumps in the road ahead. We anticipate a large number of teachers to be within retirement range within the next five years, which is why it's important to continue along the path that we're under way. So that's why the reduction to a 12-month ITE, or initial teacher education program, will definitely continue to maintain the momentum that we've embarked on.

Mme Lucille Collard: And it's not just the questions of retirement; it's a question of retention. Given the state of our schools, the class sizes, the number of kids that have special needs that are not being supported, what we've seen is that teachers that enter the profession will likely leave within five years. So, we are having a big issue with retention. The problem is not just at the recruitment level, but at the retention level.

You spoke about internationally trained teachers. How many of those have received OCT certification annually over the last four years? Are we using those internationally trained? Are they successfully graduating?

Mr. Didier Pomerleau: This may be a question for the Ministry of Education, but I happen to have that information.

Through La passerelle, which is an initiative that the Ministry of Education launched with one of its partners, the province has been able to recruit, get certified and then

get hired by French language school boards over 350 internationally trained teachers.

Mme Lucille Collard: Who delivers that La passerelle program?

Mr. Didier Pomerleau: It's delivered by the Centre franco, which is a French-language organization that is based in Ottawa, which has been active for a little over 50 years and which is a close partner to the French-language school boards.

Mme Lucille Collard: Okay.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Coe.

Mr. Lorne Coe: The line of questioning is now evolving outside of the scope of the ministry and—

Mme Lucille Collard: Okay, I'll redirect. That's fine. Thank you very much.

Sorry, Chair.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you.

Mme Lucille Collard: Just wanting information about education.

Maybe I'll ask you just another question. You mentioned \$11 million in grant money. It's additional money, I understand, that will be made available. I just would like for you to explain a little bit more how and to whom it will be available.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Thank you for the question. So that is to our French institutions. It's part of the \$284 million to small, northern and rural and French institutions, but it's bringing up the French grants from about \$97 million, adding another \$11 million towards the French institutions directly.

Mme Lucille Collard: Okay. I will have one last question. It concerns francophone doctors that have foreign credentials. I know the University of Ottawa has applied or is making a request to create a bridging program to allow all those new francophone doctors to access the profession, because there's a really big need in Ottawa. Are you supportive of this program?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Absolutely. We haven't been presented anything by the University of Ottawa, but recognizing the internationally trained professionals would be facilitated through the Ministry of Health.

Mme Lucille Collard: Okay. Thank you very much. I have no more questions.

Did you want to continue?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You have two minutes and 47 seconds. I recognize MPP Watt.

MPP Tyler Watt: Thank you to all of the ministry staff for being here today. I know you do a lot of really hard, important work, so just thank you very much.

Just quickly, I'll start off with more of a broad, high-level question here. The future funding cuts that are coming—I appreciate the increased injection of funds this year that really have saved colleges and universities across Ontario for this year. But next year's forecast said \$1.2 billion less and even less the following year. So where exactly is the \$1.2-billion reduction next year coming from?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Well, I think the member knows that the colleges are consolidated under the province's

books. With less revenues coming from international students at our college level, those numbers do show up at estimates.

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MPP Tyler Watt: So you're strictly talking about per-student funding here?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: No, I'm referencing the revenue that has been driven through international students that are on the province's books, so they do show up at estimates because they are consolidated under our books. With a decrease in revenue from international students because of the federal government's changes to the international student allocation, that does show up as a decrease in funding in the coming years.

MPP Tyler Watt: So will you commit, then, that there's not going to be any cuts or service reductions to post-secondary, OSAP, capital and other programs?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I think it's worth noting, in February of this year, we invested a \$6.4-billion investment into the sector. It's the largest in Ontario's history. In 2025, we invested almost a billion dollars into the sector—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: —and, in 2024, at the height of the federal government's changes to the international student market, we invested \$1.3 billion in the Postsecondary Education Sustainability Fund. We've almost invested \$9 billion over the last three fiscal years into post-secondary education.

MPP Tyler Watt: But I'm referring to the next two years though, where there is a predicted shortage of that \$1.2-billion reduction.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: As I've stated, we'll continue working with our post-secondary institutions to ensure that we continue to have world-class education that Ontarians know, love and deserve.

MPP Tyler Watt: Thank you, Minister. I'll get back to you in the next round.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I will now move to the independent member. I recognize MPP Clancy.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I appreciate the minister coming today and answering our questions as best as possible.

Thank you to the staff for making your way here to fill in any gaps that might arise, and for the hard work you do every day for our sector.

I want to start off with OSAP. It has caused anxiety among students—I think that's pretty obvious. When students were surveyed about any worries they had about college and university, what they said was, "worrying about additional long-term debt."

While I appreciate that prime plus 1% seems reasonable, most grads don't get a job on day one; it takes quite a while. Most provinces actually either don't charge interest at all or don't start accruing interest until a year after. Will you consider that in the next budget? Because that would help alleviate this transition for many folks who are low-, middle-income students who rely on OSAP.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: As I've mentioned, there's the six-month deferral of payments after graduation. I think it is

worth noting that 73% of all of our college grads do land a job in their field after graduation within six months. It's a bit of a different metric when it comes to university grads, but within two years, when we do the reporting, 90% of all university grads land in their field of choice after graduation. Understanding that six-month period that we have a non-repayment is aligning with 73% of our college grads that are landing jobs within those six months.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: You can understand their anxiety, though, when this chunk of money, which you know can be in tens of thousands of dollars, is accruing interest while they're looking for work. Looking for work is hard enough, let alone knowing that interest is building up on a great amount of debt. It's kind of a difficult way to start your adult life.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: And ultimately, that's why we've given more tools to students, families, to guidance counsellors and teachers as well—one that I'm very proud of is My Career Journey—so that students, before they enter into post-secondary, understand the path forward, they understand their career earnings, they understand the opportunities that are available to them, as well as different areas of the province that there could be capacity to be able to learn. I think we've given the tools necessary for parents and students to be able to make those decisions.

As I've mentioned earlier in another question, enrolment domestically, both at colleges and universities, this fall is up. So even though the opposition has been really shouting about these cuts across OSAP, we see domestic enrolment up right now. It's not necessarily being seen in the numbers on campus.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: But will you consider this pause in interest rates that almost every other province in the country already has in place? Will you consider that?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Right now, currently, the plan is that it is prime plus 1% and there's a six-month no repayment after graduation.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: All right.

I'll go back to some other areas where your ministry has been asleep at the wheel, I'll say. I think my colleague MPP Sattler talked about private colleges and the misuse of OSAP dollars in a lot of cases.

I come from the Waterloo region, and we had a bad actor in Conestoga College—going from just over 700 international students to 30,000 in a matter of three years. Recently, John Tibbits was fired at the age of 86 and received a \$4-million payout. Can you explain what your ministry is doing to get that money back?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Well, ultimately, as you're well aware, we uncovered egregious financial and governance mismanagement. I think the most important thing worth noting is that we fired the board of governors and we brought in an administrator to ensure that taxpayer dollars and student success are the number one priority.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I do appreciate the supervisor. But he created a contract where this could happen. He broke a whole bunch of rules. And that was under your government's watch. There were newspaper articles in the paper

saying that this could happen, and he laughed and said, “If I ever got \$4 million, I’d have to move to Cuba.” And then a year later, at the age of 86, instead of retiring like most people do, he got fired or whatever happened and ended up with a \$4-million payout.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: My community is reeling from this college’s bad acting over the course of many years. Thousands of people have lost their jobs. I’ll use the term “enshittification”—it’s still happening. I have ESL teachers telling me they went from 12 hours to six hours. And they hired a whole bunch of new people so that they didn’t have to pay people benefits. So they’ve reduced the quality educators—they’ve sullied the brand—and hired a bunch of new people just so that they could avoid paying benefits to people. And there were layoffs last month.

What is your government doing to build trust back with my region, which has been gravely affected by this—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you.

We’ll now move on to the government side. I recognize MPP Coe.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Thank you, Chair, and through you: Thank you, Minister, for your presentation.

Thank you to the ministry civil servants who are here, as well as staff from the minister’s office.

It was a very impactful statement, Minister, particularly as it relates to growing Ontario’s health care capacity. That’s a particular aspect that’s important to the region that I represent: the region of Durham, which is the fastest-growing in the province. We recognize, as you do and the staff from the ministry do, that health care workers play an important role in communities like Whitby, which I have the privilege of representing, and other parts of Ontario: caring for our families and making sure people can access the care they need, importantly, when they need it.

As our province continues to grow, so does the need for more doctors, nurses and other health care professionals, and you touched on this to a degree in your presentation to us. Can you expand on that and share what the government is doing to train more health care workers and strengthen, in the process, Ontario’s health care workforce for the years ahead?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Thank you for the important question, MPP Coe. More importantly, thank you for being such a dedicated parliamentary assistant to my ministry as well as to the region that you serve.

Health care workers are the backbone of our communities. I don’t think I need to tell anyone that. They are the nurses caring for patients around the clock, the paramedics responding when families need them the most, the laboratory professionals supporting critical diagnoses, and the doctors providing care in our communities across the whole province.

As I mention often, as a father of three, I know firsthand the comfort and reassurance that comes from knowing highly skilled health care professionals are there when your family needs them.

As Ontario continues to grow, we know that demand for care is growing with it. That means we need to train

more health care professionals, get them into the workforce sooner, and create opportunities for them to build rewarding careers in communities across Ontario. That is exactly what our government is doing. Working alongside the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Long-Term Care, we are making strategic investments across the entire health care talent pipeline. From nursing to paramedicine to doctors and lab techs, we are ensuring Ontario has the highly skilled workers needed to deliver high-quality care today and for generations to come.

Let me begin with nursing. Nurses are often the first person a patient sees when they enter our health care system and the person who remains by their side throughout their care. Their work is essential in hospitals, long-term-care homes, community clinics, primary care settings in communities across all of Ontario. That is why our government continues to expand nursing education across the province. Today, nursing education is delivered by 24 colleges, 15 universities and six Indigenous institutes, giving students opportunities to study and train closer to home.

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Last year, our government invested \$56.8 million to support up to 2,200 new nursing education seats at publicly assisted colleges and universities. Since we have taken office, Ontario has added nearly 100,000 new nurses to the workforce and today, approximately 30,000 learners are studying to become future nurses.

We are also accelerating pathways into the workforce. That’s why our government is supporting accelerated bachelor of science in nursing programs at Conestoga College, at St. Lawrence College, Western University and York University, allowing students to complete their degrees in three and a half years.

Our government is modernizing nursing practice as well. We’re investing \$750,000 to support registered nurse prescribing education at Georgian College, Humber Polytechnic and the University of Windsor, making Ontario the first jurisdiction in Canada to embed RN prescribing in undergraduate nursing education.

After 20 years without a new university-based nursing program, our government launched a new bachelor of science in nursing program at Carleton University in 2024, one of my first announcements as minister, which will graduate nurses with hands-on hospital experience.

Strengthening the workforce also means expanding opportunity and supports for Indigenous learners. Indigenous institutes deliver culturally responsive education and training close to home. Through our partnership with the Ministry of Long-Term Care, our government is providing an additional \$14 million to expand PSW and nursing programs at eight Indigenous Institutes, including student supports to improve retention and completion. This builds on the \$13 million that was provided to six Indigenous institutes in 2025-26, and since 2021-22, nearly 400 learners have graduated, strengthening care capacities in communities across Ontario.

Hospitals and community settings rely on a diverse range of skilled professionals. Behind every patient, diag-

nosis, emergency response and successful treatment is a broader team of highly trained professionals. That's why our government continues to expand training in these critical professions. We're investing nearly \$600,000 this year to support Confederation College's delivery of the three-year medical laboratory science program in Thunder Bay. We are strengthening access in northern Ontario. Our government also provided \$6 million to support enrolment growth of nearly 950 students in primary care paramedicine programs at 18 colleges, strengthening emergency response and expanding access to care in communities across all of Ontario.

Training health care workers is only half the equation. We also need to make sure they get to the communities that need them the most. That's why our government launched the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant in 2023. This program reduces financial barriers to health care education by offering up-front funding for tuition, books and related education costs for students in eligible nursing, paramedic and medical laboratory technology programs. In return, graduates will work in the region where they studied. Since its launch, the program has delivered over \$182 million in support of more than 13,300 future health care professionals. We're ensuring that we can keep delivering this life-changing program by investing another \$262 million to continue the OLSG program in budget 2025.

Building on the success of this program, we're expanding the grant to future family medicine physicians. Starting in 2026-27, our government is investing \$220 million to support the education of more than 2,000 family doctors who will practise here in Ontario. Medical students in post-graduate family medicine programs will receive funding that covers tuition and other educational costs from their undergraduate medical education. In return, they will practise family medicine anywhere in Ontario after they complete their residency for at least five years.

At the same time, our government is undertaking one of the largest expansions of medical education Ontario has seen in decades. We're adding 340 more undergraduate seats and 551 first-year postgraduate seats to the system. These are substantial system-wide expansions that directly strengthen Ontario's physician pipeline.

We've also invested \$180 million to open the Toronto Metropolitan University School of Medicine, Ontario's first new medical school in 20 years, which had over 200 students in its first year, last fall.

We're also investing \$56 million to support the planning, operations and accreditation of York University's new school of medicine in Vaughan—one that I am particularly proud of. It is the first medical school in Ontario dedicated entirely to training family doctors and primary care physicians. These learners are being trained in community-based, real-world settings, strengthening connections between medical education and patient care.

Building and protecting a strong health care workforce requires sustained, coordinated action, and that is exactly what our government is delivering. We are expanding training capacity across nursing, medicine, allied health, midwifery and paramedicine. We are accelerating path-

ways into practice. We are breaking down financial barriers, and we are bringing highly skilled workers to communities that need them the most.

From Indigenous institutes to new medical schools, from northern colleges to fast-growing regions, Ontario is building the health care workforce our province needs today and for generations to come. And our government will continue this work because a strong health care system begins and ends with strong people.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Triantafilopoulos.

Ms. Effie J. Triantafilopoulos: Thank you, Minister, for joining us here today for the estimates.

I have a question and it is as follows: As the Ontario government, under the leadership of Premier Ford, continues working to protect Ontario's economy and support long-term growth, we know how important it is to make sure students are gaining the skills employers need. Colleges and universities play a very vital role in preparing the next generation of workers for good, in-demand careers.

Minister, can you share with us how the government's investments are helping post-secondary institutions respond to labour market needs and build a strong workforce for Ontario's future?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Thank you for the thoughtful question.

Across our colleges, universities and Indigenous institutes, students are developing the knowledge and skills that will power our province for decades to come. They're training to become nurses and doctors, engineers and researchers, teachers and trade workers.

Today's students will build our homes, care for our families, drive innovation and grow our economy tomorrow. And with the global economy changing rapidly, there has never been a more important time to ensure we have a strong pipeline of highly skilled workers to keep our province moving.

That is why our government is strengthening the connection between Ontario's post-secondary system and the jobs our economy needs. We're investing in programs that students want to create the workforce that employers need and where Ontario's industries have the opportunity to lead.

Earlier this year, we announced a historic \$6.4-billion, new funding model sustaining our post-secondary institutions for decades to come. This includes:

- \$1.7 billion towards 70,000 more seats in high-demand programs such as STEM, health care, education and the trades;

- building a made-in-Ontario talent pool that will cement the province as one of the most competitive places in the G7 to invest, create jobs and do business; and

- ensuring businesses have the highly skilled workers to retain and grow Ontario's economic advantage for decades to come.

And when it comes to building our future workforce, we're not stopping there.

Last summer, we invested \$75 million to train 7,800 more students in construction-related programs at colleges, universities and Indigenous institutes across Ontario.

We're also meeting the growing demand for health care professionals, another essential line of work. The Ontario Learn and Stay Grant provides full upfront costs for tuition, books and other direct educational costs for future nurses, paramedics and lab techs. In exchange, students stay and work in the region where they studied.

Since its launch in 2023, the program has delivered over \$182 million to support more than 13,300 students. Last year, we invested another \$262 million to keep this program going, bringing more highly skilled workers to the communities that need them the most. And starting this fall, our government is expanding the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant to future family doctors by investing \$220 million.

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Students currently in family medicine residency programs can apply to have their tuition and other educational costs from their undergraduate medical education retroactively covered. In return, they will practise family medicine anywhere in Ontario for at least five years after graduation.

To keep building our physician pipeline, we're leading the largest expansion of medical education in over a decade. We've added 340 undergraduate and 551 post-graduate seats in medical schools across the province. We opened a new medical school at the Toronto Metropolitan University in Brampton last fall, and York University School of Medicine is expected to welcome its inaugural class in 2028.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: And starting in fall 2026, all medical schools in Ontario are required to allocate at least 95% of all undergraduate medical spaces to Ontario residents, with the other 5% reserved for students from the rest of Canada.

I want to take a moment to recognize our nurses, who are the backbone of our health care system.

Ontario continues to expand nursing enrolment at colleges and universities to address the need for nurses now and into the future. Last year, our government invested \$57 million to support 2,200 new nursing education seats at publicly assisted colleges and universities. Since we have taken office, we have added nearly 100,000 new nurses to the workforce, with another 30,000 students currently studying to become nurses.

And on the topic of vital professions for our communities, let's not forget about the teachers. My wife is a teacher—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister. We'll now go to the official opposition after that comment about your wife.

I recognize MPP Sattler.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I have a couple of questions I'd like to ask on vote item 3001-1, ministry administration; that also covers legal services.

My question is about Keel Digital Solutions, which, as the minister knows, was a supplier that was contracted by the ministry, also received some skills development funds. There was a forensic audit showing that the company was misusing those dollars, so a \$25-million lawsuit was filed.

There is a keen public interest, obviously, in finding out the outcome of the lawsuit. But today, we learned that the government failed to file the motion to have the hearings set for tomorrow, and the hearings have been cancelled.

So I wondered if this minister's legal services branch was involved with this. Does this mean that the government is giving up on pursuing the lawsuit?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Well, again, thank you for the question.

As I've stated previously in the House, a routine audit of an external service provider—and we do many routine audits of external service providers—raised concerns which led to a comprehensive forensic audit of the organization in question. When we received the results of that audit, within 24 hours, we reported it to the OPP because—I've said this time and time again—any allegation of misuse of public dollars is completely unacceptable, and our government will do a thorough investigation to ensure that taxpayer dollars are well-respected.

But as you're well aware, because the matter is before the courts, I won't be commenting any further.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Okay, so we don't know if the lawsuit is going ahead or not.

Again on the vote item regarding ministry administration, I wanted to ask a few questions about the administration of OSAP.

We're a month into the new school year. I'm hearing from lots of students, especially in the private career colleges, that they're still waiting for the financial assistance that they were told that they would be getting. Students at private career colleges are still eligible for loans. They've applied for loans. They've been approved for loans. But they haven't got the financing, and they are getting desperate. They are being told by administrators that the reason for the delay is administrative holdups at the ministry level.

So my question is, when can these students who are still waiting for OSAP funding expect to receive the funding that they were approved for?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Again, thank you for the question.

Private institutions must be reviewed and reapproved each year to maintain OSAP eligibility, and that review process is ongoing.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: So do we have an answer for those students as to how long the review process is going to take and when they can expect to get the funding that they are eligible and were approved for?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: So as I just referenced, private institutions have to be reviewed annually and reapproved each year to maintain OSAP eligibility, and that review process is ongoing. But we are aware of concerns and

irregularities involving OSAP at some private career colleges and the ministry is investigating.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Okay. Again on the subject of private career colleges: The post-secondary education program under this ministry includes the superintendent of career colleges, who is responsible for regulating the sector, which is growing: 595 registered private career colleges in Ontario.

There have been several Auditor General reports that have raised some serious concerns about oversight. In 2021, the auditor said that there were not “adequate systems and processes” in place to “validate that private career colleges are providing quality, up-to-date education to its students.” Some 30% of private career colleges had not been inspected by the ministry at that time.

And then we just recently received another auditor report on commercial truck driving training, which had similar findings: A quarter of the truck driving training programs at private career colleges had never been inspected. The auditor said that there were only eight ministry inspectors for all 595 private career colleges, which could explain some of the bottleneck.

But in light of this 2021 report from the auditor, in light of the serious allegations of OSAP fraud at some private career colleges, in light of the alarming lack of oversight of commercial truck driving programs, I’d like the minister to tell us what the government or what he is doing to tighten up oversight of private career colleges.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: With reference to the Auditor General’s recommendations on trucking career colleges, we have accepted all of the recommendations.

We inspected the remaining career college offering class A truck driver training programs weeks ahead of schedule with no major issues found. Since we have taken office, we have closed down dozens of truck driver training programs.

I’ll continue working with the Minister of Transportation to ensure that our post-secondary system has integrity and Ontario roads are kept safe.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Okay. I want to now ask some more questions about vote item 3002-1, the post-secondary education program. As the minister well knows, there was a blue-ribbon panel appointed by his government that issued a report back in 2023 that called for significant increases for operating funding for the sector, and these calls were echoed by pretty much every single PSC stakeholder.

The additional funding that was announced this year is certainly welcome but doesn’t come close to the amount of funding that was recommended. We know from the Financial Accountability Officer that Ontario’s per-student funding remains, by a long shot, the lowest in Canada for both colleges and universities; we’re not even close to the national average.

My question is: Does the minister have a strategy to move Ontario out of bottom place in terms of per-student funding for post-secondary education and closer to the national average?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Through you, Chair: I think the member referenced the blue-ribbon panel, and it was in

2022. I think there has been a significant amount of change in the sector, so that blue-ribbon panel—some of the recommendations, I do believe, are dated.

I think one of the largest components is the sustainability of the sector since the federal government made significant changes over two years but since the blue-ribbon panel that took place—I mentioned it earlier, but in 2024, at the height or the start of the instability that the federal government created, we brought forward a \$1.3-billion Postsecondary Education Sustainability Fund to ensure that there was sustainability across the system during the time of significant change through the federal government’s unilateral policy decisions. And then we followed that up in budget 2025 with almost a billion dollars worth of investment into the sector, including \$750 million towards 20,000 newly funded STEM seats. We’ve seen almost a 35% increase in STEM applications from 2020 to 2024, so we want to ensure that we’re meeting the needs of the students.

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This year, I would be remiss to not mention our \$6.4-billion investment into the sector, the largest not only in Ontario history but Canadian history—a significant investment. Part of that is \$3.3 billion to be able to ensure high-cost programs are made whole as well as \$1.7 billion to add 70,000 new seats in high-priority programs that are going to drive the economy moving forward.

Over the last couple of years, we’ve added over 100,000 new seats to our post-secondary sector. We’ll continue making those investments that are needed, and we’ll continue working with our post-secondary institutions to continue having a world-class education system here in Ontario.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Okay, but Ontario will have to really step up a lot more if we’re going to come even close to the national per-student average: \$15,000 for colleges compared to \$9,500 that Ontario spends; \$10,500 for university per student compared to the national average of \$17,500.

The context for the fiscal situation that the sector is facing is at a time when college programs are being cancelled or shut down at an alarming pace. I’ve lost track—700, 800 college programs cancelled or suspended over the last year. We’re up to about 12,000 college workers who no longer have jobs.

There are lots of examples with those programs that have been cancelled of programs that were meeting labour market needs. We had culinary programs at George Brown, Loyalist and Confederation; dental assisting at Fanshawe; applied museum studies at Algonquin. These programs were feeding graduates directly into local and regional labour markets.

I know that cancelled programs were eligible for the new seats funded by the priority growth plans—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Point of order.

Mr. Lorne Coe: Chair, once again, we’re straying into an area that involves institutional decision-making, and that’s outside the scope of what we’re here to discuss today, sir.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I'll focus my question on the priority growth seats that the minister had just talked about. This funding was available to institutions to fund seats that met labour market needs. Can you tell us how many of the new funded seats were for programs that had been previously cancelled?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: As that member knows, decisions related to staffing, course offering, operations and budgeting lie solely with each institution at the local level on behalf of the board of governors and the senior leadership at the institutions.

Referencing the priority growth funding—this \$1.7 billion for 70,000 newly funded seats—I'm quite proud of the process, Chair. Ultimately, we received a thousand letters of support from the economy, from corporate entities that understood the importance of the colleges in their communities. Those letters of support were far-ranging right across the province in many different sectors.

I think it's worth referencing: The students are driving these decisions and the new seats we're putting online. As I already referenced earlier, between 2020 and 2024, we saw a 35% increase in STEM applications, and that's why the lion's share of those 70,000 seats—40,200 of them—landed in STEM. Students are speaking with their feet. They're really wanting to be in the STEM program in health care, education and trades, and that's where the seats have landed across the whole province.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you for the response, Minister. You didn't actually address my question as to whether programs that had been cancelled were now funded with the priority growth program.

I know communities would be interested in seeing these applications. I wondered if the public will be able to access the proposals that were not accepted. Is there going to be transparency about how the proposals were scored for these priority growth plans?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: The significant amount of proposals will be kept confidential in the ministry. But I think it's worth noting here that the one that I'm always intrigued by is McMaster and the nuclear reactor. I think everyone in this room knows the really aggressive mandate we have to power Ontario for the future. Having the letter of support from Bruce Power, understanding the impact of McMaster graduates to the nuclear industry, is significant, as well as Ontario Tech and the impact they're having as well.

I think the one thing that really stood out to me is, with these 70,000 newly funded seats in priority growth programs, the institutions really did the groundwork to ensure that they're meeting the needs of the communities they serve.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: It's most evident in the thousand letters of support we received to be able to ensure that we're meeting the needs of the communities and the corporate entities.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you for the response.

The Council of Ontario Universities has projected that more than one million university grads will be needed over

the next decade to fill jobs requiring university-level education, and those jobs don't all fall into STEM, health care, education, and skilled trades. So my question is, will there be funding for additional post-secondary seats, including those in programs that do not fall into the four priority areas? We need a diversified workforce to support a strong local, regional and provincial—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

We'll now move on to the third party for 15 minutes. I recognize MPP Watt.

MPP Tyler Watt: I've had the opportunity and privilege of travelling around Ontario, visiting many colleges and universities, and speaking with students. I've heard about their concerns that are increasingly more stressful on them. Students, like everyone, are dealing with the cost-of-living crisis that we are facing. They are worried about more than just OSAP. They are worried about rent, housing, groceries, transportation, tuition, textbooks. And the changes in OSAP and the increased cost of living have forced many students to have to get part-time and full-time jobs just to barely make ends meet. The sense that I get from young people is that they feel hopeless. They're not asking for the world; they're just asking for a chance and for opportunity. So when this government made the decision to significantly change the OSAP grants, it was a punch in the gut, and this is why young people have been advocating for the reversal of this.

I will get into OSAP, but I would like to talk about the fact that we have the lowest per-student funding in Canada. I acknowledge the increase this year; it was very welcome. But the plan moving forward—it's going to go down, and we still will be the lowest-funded-per-student in Canada. Right now, Ontario—for colleges, it's \$9,400 versus, nationally, \$15,000; universities, \$10,500 versus, nationally, \$17,400. I see in the estimates that there are plans to reduce that per-student funding after the increase this year.

So, Minister, what do you expect the colleges and universities to do? Where will they have to absorb that reduction in per-student funding from the province?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Thank you for mentioning the historic \$6.4-billion investment we put into the sector. I'm surprised I haven't mentioned it up until this point in estimates. Operating funding is going up 30% this fall; it's going from \$5 billion to \$7 billion. And when it comes to overall funding, we're second-highest in Canada for overall funding of our post-secondary system, which I am very proud—

MPP Tyler Watt: I'm talking about per-student funding and the cuts that are coming next year and the year after.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Again, I think it's worth referencing the \$3.3 billion out of the \$6.4 billion that's funding those high-cost, high-priority programs across our post-secondary sector. But \$1.1 billion of the \$6.4 billion also went to base increase funding for students. It's a 6% increase for full-time students—

MPP Tyler Watt: Chair, I'd like to bring it back.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Go ahead.

MPP Tyler Watt: I'm asking about the following two years, not this year and what you've already done. I've acknowledged that that increase was welcome, but what about the following two years, with those reductions in per-student funding—again, the lowest in Canada.

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Hon. Nolan Quinn: As I've already referenced, the \$6.4 billion, the historic investment, has stabilized the sector. Some \$3.3 billion of that went into weighted grant units to ensure those high-cost, high-priority programs are made whole to continue offering them in the communities that we serve—

MPP Tyler Watt: I'd like to bring it back. To me, the question's not being answered.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: —and \$1.1 billion of that increased per-student funding across the board by 6%, and 30% to part-time college students—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister. It's MPP Watt's time.

Go ahead.

MPP Tyler Watt: Thank you, Chair.

Something that you've referenced, Minister, multiple times here is the “unsustainability” of OSAP from 2018. Now, your government itself said in 2019 that you had addressed that. In fact, I was one of the students that received one of the most significant cuts to OSAP when I was going into my third year of my nursing program. It's actually part of the reason why I'm sitting here today. It really lit a fire under me when it came to advocacy for young people. I remember you all saying, “We fixed it,” that it became sustainable. So what happened from 2019 to 2026 that has caused you to reduce these grants from 85% down to 15%?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: As you referenced 2018, I think it's worth noting again that the Auditor General, in 2018, is the one that stated it was unsustainable—

MPP Tyler Watt: She actually never said it was unsustainable.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: —but ultimately—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One at a time, please.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Am I okay to speak, Chair?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Go ahead.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Growth and participation among students with higher levels of need have driven increases in OSAP allocations per student. But understanding the billions of dollars of pressure we're under, the federal government made changes to allocations of career colleges and the grants that are associated with that.

I articulated pretty clearly that it was a \$2.3-billion pressure that was going to be on our OSAP system as of August of this year, growing to \$2.7 billion in the years ahead. That's on top of, as I've referenced earlier, domestic applications to both colleges and universities increased this year, and it's projected to increase in the years ahead.

We needed to move quickly to ensure that OSAP is sustainable not just for today but for the generations of students behind them, because we want to ensure that accessibility to post-secondary is sustained.

MPP Tyler Watt: Thank you, Minister. When it comes to OSAP, though, I'm still not understanding what the difference was.

You point frequently to the federal government's decision—their changes with the international students—but to me that really goes to show that a lot of these post-secondary institutions were having to depend on it. Some abused it. We know that. But they were depending on these international students to make up for the severe lack of funding from this province.

I'd like to inquire a bit more about what happened with the private career colleges. The current FAO data showed that private career college students became a rapidly growing component of OSAP. I appreciate that it is pure loan now, as it should be, but there was nearly a billion dollars in one year given to private career college students through grants—\$554 million increased to \$994 million. So, was the current OSAP cost pressure caused by the 2018 program or was it caused by the spending growth that occurred under your government's administration, particularly with the private institutions?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Well, again, I think it's always worth noting that where a student chooses to attend school is their choice, whether it's at a publicly assisted college or university, or a private career college.

But I think I need to clarify some of my comments that you're referencing. When it comes to the challenges with the international students, that was a federal government decision that affected our public colleges and universities. When it comes to our private career colleges, ultimately, there was a federal government decision that changed the allocation of their grants-to-loan ratio, and that's why we acted to change OSAP.

I think he's compounded the two of them, because I do reference the federal government's changes when it comes to international student allocations, but this is separate to that. When it comes to the career colleges, the federal government's policy change changed all domestic students that are going to a career college to 100% loan, which was putting the \$2.3-billion pressure on OSAP.

MPP Tyler Watt: I was just referencing that the dependence on international students was making up for a severe underfunding of a lot of these establishments. I spoke to many colleges and a lot of them were worried if they'd even make it through the year. We've still seen programs being cut, even colleges shutting down. Again, I welcome the injection this year. It really has saved a lot of establishments but we're not out of the woods yet and I do worry with where we are going, especially when I look at the forecast for the following years.

Back to OSAP: It's been obviously a very hot topic. A lot of young people came here protesting, people going back to school now. It's a little disheartening to see things like the OSAP delays—how disheartened young people are with the changes in the grants, how much more debt that they're going to have to take on to get an education and training into a workforce where we so desperately need them. The student financial assistance programs this year are budgeted at \$2.45 billion, roughly \$500 million

below the revised estimate from last year. Where, specifically, is that half-a-billion reduction coming from? You did reference that opposition likes to talk about cuts. I think that's what we're referring to.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Well, I think it's pretty clear that the grant-to-loan ratio has changed. It hasn't been cut, but there has been a variation of the grant-to-loan ratio, and that's where those \$500 million of savings are coming from.

MPP Tyler Watt: Right.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: But ultimately, I think it is worth noting, the dollars are still available to the students. It's just in a different form. Instead of being offered as a grant, the dollars are still available—there's no cuts—to the students, just in the form of a loan.

MPP Tyler Watt: Yes, and that's giving a lot of young people hope. You talk about protecting Ontario, dealing with affordability, but saddling our young people with more debt is not, to me, achieving those things whatsoever. They really just want to be heard, they want to be acknowledged, and Ontario is doing something very different compared to a lot of other provinces.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): To the question, please.

MPP Tyler Watt: Thank you.

OSAP is \$1.429 billion for student financial assistance in 2025-26. How much of that \$1.4 billion supplementary appropriation was attributable to private career colleges this year?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Well, understanding that's private career colleges, they haven't had regulated tuition, it is a bit higher. But the other thing I think we need to focus on when we speak about career colleges, it's a different demographic. They're looking for short duration, flexible formats, usually on evenings and weekends, accelerated programs with year-round intakes. The dependence and the demographics of people attending career colleges are different and ultimately that is shown in the OSAP numbers.

MPP Tyler Watt: Thank you, Minister. So 95% of OSAP grant growth actually came from those private career colleges, but OSAP was changed system-wide. I'd like to ask: Did the ministry model what OSAP would cost if you addressed the private career college problem but maintained the previous grant structure for public college and university students?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I think we've clearly articulated that it would be a \$2.3-billion pressure this August if we didn't act on the OSAP changes, which was growing to a \$2.7-billion pressure.

MPP Tyler Watt: So when you created the new model, you did not or did include the private career colleges in that?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I think you're focusing specifically on career colleges, but I've been very clear: The whole system was unsustainable. The Auditor General clearly articulated that in 2018 and we're dealing with that pressure right now. As I've already said many times today, we've seen domestic enrolment increase this fall and in the

years to come, there's projections of significant increase in domestic enrolment.

MPP Tyler Watt: I don't think we can keep pointing back to 2018 as the reason for the changes to OSAP. You all said it was dealt with in 2019. So what was the motivation—

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I wasn't elected in 2019; I was elected in 2022.

MPP Tyler Watt: What was the motivation for changing the OSAP grants this year?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I think we've been pretty clear that it's been unsustainable. The Auditor General was very clear that it was unsustainable—

MPP Tyler Watt: In 2018.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: —and we're dealing with the pressures of the unsustainability—

MPP Tyler Watt: It's 2026, Minister.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: And we're feeling the pressures of that unsustainability. You know, the \$2.3-billion pressure—we've seen significant growth across OSAP and now we're dealing with that pressure before it became unsustainable and wasn't available to the next generation. I stand behind our decision to change the grant-to-loan ratio so that not just these students can have the accessibility of OSAP but the generation of students behind them as well.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I think that question has been answered.

MPP Tyler Watt: Thank you, Chair.

I'm going to talk a little bit about cost of living and how that's incorporated to OSAP. As I said, students are worried about cost of living. Everyone in Ontario and this country is feeling it.

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What does OSAP currently assume a student's needs are for rent, food and transportation, and when were those amounts last updated?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Well, ultimately, each individual student is looked at on their individual needs in individual cases.

And if I'm going to go back to your previous question, that is why we've seen larger numbers at the career colleges: because the demographics are different. Quite often, they have more dependents, so it increases the average OSAP allocation towards that.

But I think it's worth noting the tuition component. We froze tuition in 2019. We removed 10% of tuition. That saved over a billion dollars for families and students across Ontario. And those savings will continue to be felt, not just by today's students, but for generations of students behind them.

We flatlined a significant increase under the previous government, the previous Liberal government.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: We saw an 83% increase in tuition during times of 30% inflation, almost three times the going rate of inflation. We are the government that held tuition flat over the last five years of significant inflationary pressures.

MPP Tyler Watt: The problem, though, with that is, although it saves students some money over time, you didn't do anything to actually make the universities and colleges whole. That's why they had to depend on international students to fill that gap, and it's created the crisis that we're in here today.

Anyhow, I will pass it on to my colleague here.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You had 17 seconds left.

MPP Tyler Watt: It's all good.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Clancy, the independent member.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I always like to look on a little bit of the bright side, so I will say I want to thank you for the investment in health—Innovation Arena in my riding. We have a lot of great entrepreneurs, and it's great to have a space that they can make use of to build their businesses. My hope is that you talk to the health minister so they can sell in Ontario, if you don't mind—nudge.

I think one of the concerns I have—it's a bit layered. AI has kind of fundamentally changed how students are learning. I'm hearing from co-op people that students are using AI in interviews, that some employers are opting not to hire co-op students or young grads because they're using AI instead. And I think we are seeing record-high unemployment in our youth.

So is there a strategy from your ministry in how you're spending your money to make sure that you're addressing the new challenges that AI is posing on the way students learn and the employment opportunities that are at risk right now?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Absolutely.

I think it's worth noting that each institution, especially our universities, is looking at AI a little differently. I think it was Carleton University: For their law students, AI would not be utilized because they wanted them to understand the real-world learnings of writing down notes in that regard.

But AI is a significant tool. The godfather of AI came from the University of Toronto, and that's why we have such a strong ecosystem of AI companies here in downtown Toronto.

I think one aspect I'm significantly proud of is the Vector Institute. I did a round table at Vector last summer, and I think it's at the point that we're producing so many AI grads in Ontario, but it's still not enough for the economy. It's to the point now that our AI companies in Ontario are starting to be a bit "elbows up" because the banks are stealing a lot of those AI grads.

So the ecosystem right now is so fulsome in downtown Toronto that there's a significant opportunity for our graduates after they graduate.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I guess my concern is it's also compromising the quality of their education when it becomes a crutch instead of a tool that's helpful. How are you addressing the harms that it can cause?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Well, as a reference, each institution does have their own policies in place when it comes to AI. I think one would be Ontario Tech. They have a

national research chair that's there, and they're setting up the guardrails for AI to understand that it's evolving so quickly.

I think this is a conversation that's not just happening in Ontario but across Canada and the world. So I'm quite proud of Ontario Tech's work to set those guardrails up to ensure, as we evolve AI, that the guardrails that need to be in place are in place. But ultimately, each institution is focusing on AI to ensure that the students are getting the best out of their education.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: So can we expect to see some guardrails from your ministry?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: It's something that we're always going to continue to look at, and AI is evolving pretty significantly, but it's the individual institutions that are going to set up their AI policy for their institution.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: Okay; thank you.

And what do you have to say for the high rate of unemployment in young people? You know, I talked to the folks at University of Waterloo, for example, and because of budget constraints, they're having to make cuts in their co-op placements, and fewer employers are accepting students for co-op placements. I mean, that's one of their core strengths. What could you be doing, or maybe your government do, to make sure that those young people get their first crack at some workplace experience in their field?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Absolutely. That's something myself and my deputy have conversations on quite often. Youth unemployment is a concern across Ontario and Canada, and North America for that matter. Getting the soft skills experience in your first job: If you haven't had that, it puts more pressure on our post-secondary education system.

Even under pressure, I think it's worth noting our college students—79% of college grads—have a form of work-integrated learning as well as 76% of our university grads have a form of work-integrated learning, which has actually increased by about 4% over the last couple of years.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I am a huge proponent of work-integrated learning. We did round tables last year, and the loudest people at the round tables, the loudest employers, were the ones that weren't embracing work-integrated learning. It helps with recruitment, it helps with retention, but it also, more importantly, helps our students. It helps their process to be able to land that first job after post-secondary.

Ms. Aislinn Clancy: I'll just finish with that I would like to see that average improve. The rates of per-student funding for our colleges and universities are quite low, even just compared to, I think, PEI in second-to-last place. It's, like, a 70% increase just to tie for last place. I think our institutions are feeling it. I'm not sure if you're hearing it, but we are, that they're still struggling with this fiscal allocation per student. I just wanted to share that.

The other impact of OSAP that hasn't been shared is more students are living at home. So we have—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

We'll now go to the government side. We'll go with MPP Pierre.

Ms. Natalie Pierre: Thank you, Minister. Just to continue the conversation a little bit, before I ask my question, around the work-integrated learning piece: We had the Minister of Long-Term Care here for estimates earlier this afternoon talking about some of the Living Classrooms for PSW students and the real success stories that are coming out of that in terms of realistic previews for students so they understand the work that they're about to undertake in their profession. It's a win for employers. So they set up their pipeline from graduates.

I think that it's conversations that I have with stakeholders that I'm meeting in my community, day in and day out, and just talking about those ideas and really just saying, "Hey, have you ever thought about taking on a co-op student or participating in a work-integrated learning program?" I think it's incumbent upon all of us to have those conversations. It's just a win-win solution. I know that I hire co-op students and summer students in my office as well. I just wanted to thank you for that and really support the value of that.

But my question is really around French-language post-secondary education. Earlier, we had questions specifically around French-language teacher education programs to address some of the francophone community's needs, but I'm thinking of other areas besides French-language teachers' education—other French-language colleges and universities and some of the programs that they're offering to help ensure that students can study in French while building the skills they need for a rewarding career. Maybe you can share a little bit about what the government is doing to support high-quality, French-language post-secondary education across the province?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Absolutely. Thank you for the question.

Before I get to the question, thank you for taking on co-op students. I think it is so important. My constituency office just took our first high school co-op student, because if I'm walking the walk, I'm talking the talk—I do believe there's a lot of impact.

Going back to the previous question about work-integrated learning and the uncertainty in the economy, I truly believe, as an employer in my previous life, now is the time to invest more into work-integrated learning when there's uncertainty in the economy so whenever the economy does go back to booming, you're ready for the boom that's ahead of us. I do believe it's slightly short-sighted for employers to possibly be retracting their work-integrated learning co-op and internships because, quite often, students that are on their work-integrated learning placement are solving problems that the employees of that institution were unable to do.

I think of Ross Video. They have their manufacturing facility in my riding, but their R&D is in Ottawa. It's David Ross, second generation, he'll always state, "My dad kicked me out of the company to go do a co-op placement for a different company." And the thing that reson-

ates with me, and I say it to employers all the time: His work-integrated learning, his co-op students are not just photocopying; they're working on real-life projects, real-life challenges and creating real-life solutions.

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So not only is it a benefit to the students, but it's a significant benefit to the employer that has taken them on as well. It also helps with recruitment and retention. The employers that are really all in on work-integrated learning and co-ops don't have as many recruitment problems. They seem to have a full morale, a full set of employees that are there. So to me, there's a significant correlation between work-integrated learning and stability of employers as well.

But to get to the question you were referencing—I'd like to thank MPP Pierre for that important question. Ontario is home to one of the largest French-language post-secondary systems in Canada—and for myself, being from eastern Ontario, we have a significant francophone population—serving nearly 37,000 students enrolled in high-quality French-language and bilingual programs at colleges and universities across our province.

French-language post-secondary education is training the next generation of francophone workers for Ontario. It is key to ensuring we have strong and vibrant francophone communities across the province. And as we take steps to protect Ontario amid economic uncertainty, our government is making strategic investments to strengthen access to French-language higher education. By investing in French-language post-secondary programs, we're not just expanding access; we're developing one of the most competitive workforces in the G7.

That's why our government continues to provide special-purpose grants to address the additional costs of delivering French-language and bilingual programs. Last year, we provided over \$97 million in special-purpose grants to French-language and bilingual institutions. Through our \$6.4-billion new funding model, we're investing an additional \$284 million to support the unique needs of small, northern, rural and French-language post-secondary schools. As a result of this additional funding, these schools will now receive a total of \$1.2 billion in specialized funding, ensuring they can continue to deliver world-class programming. We have also invested \$21.6 million to relaunch courses at the Université de Sudbury, offering more programs to French-language students across the province.

As we look to expand access to French-language education, we're also looking ahead to the people who will inspire and guide the next generation of francophone students. That's why in 2025-26, our government invested \$55.8 million to train 2,600 new teachers by 2027, including over 500 students in French-language and French-as-a-second-language programs.

Since 2021, our government has invested more than \$30 million in the Ontario French-language teacher recruitment and retention strategy. These investments have permitted the University of Ottawa, Laurentian University and the Université de l'Ontario français to expand their

teaching education programs and train even more French-language teachers.

For example, in 2021, the University of Ottawa and Laurentian University had 848 students enrolled in the French-language teacher education programs. Enrolments in these programs, as well as at the Université de L'ontario's new program, reached 1,763 students in 2026—a 100% increase over that period.

We're also confident that our decision to reduce teachers' training from two to one year will encourage a greater number of candidates to pursue a career in education.

These measures are part of our broader strategy to ensure Ontario's education system has more French-language teachers from kindergarten to grade 12 and across the province to prepare students for success in their academic and career journeys.

Our government is also expanding the number of French-language doctors, nurses and other essential health care workers by ensuring that our French-language and bilingual colleges and universities continue to offer world-class health care-related programs.

We're proud to have provided \$4.8 million to support the enrolment expansions at the University of Ottawa's medical school. We're also proud of our work to establish Canada's first independent medical university, the Northern Ontario School of Medicine, which offers a francophone admission stream in northern Ontario.

Building on this success, we provided \$2.7 million last year to French-language and bilingual colleges and universities to expand the number of nursing seats. This funding includes up to \$2.4 million in ongoing funding that will add 120 practical nursing and nearly 160 bachelor of nursing spaces.

Last year, we also provided \$323,000 to Collège Boréal and Collège La Cité so they could add 51 new spaces to their primary care paramedic programs.

In addition to funding these health care programs, we have provided financial support through the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant to more than 1,840 French-language students since 2023, who are training to become nurses, paramedics and lab techs.

All of the investments I've just highlighted today are more than just numbers; they reflect our values and our plan for Ontario. They show how we're protecting francophone communities, workers and culture. French-language post-secondary education is not just a cultural asset; it's a strategic advantage. It builds a strong French-language workforce, strengthens local communities and creates a more resilient and prosperous Ontario for all. Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): MPP Pang.

Mr. Billy Pang: Mr. Chair, through you to the minister: We talked about AI. We've talked about francophones now. How about we talk about Indigenous learners?

Indigenous youth are a growing part of Ontario's future workforce. Access to high-quality education and training can open the door to good-paying, rewarding careers while supporting strong communities.

Minister, can you share what the government is doing to ensure Indigenous students have the skills and opportunities they need to succeed?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I'd like to thank MPP Pang for that very important question. As our province faces economic uncertainties brought about by global trade disruptions, colleges, universities and Indigenous institutes are essential to protecting Ontario's future. It's in these schools that we're educating the next generation of workers, who will strengthen their communities and drive our economy. Whether it's training the next nurse, entrepreneur, electrician or educator, these institutions equip students with the skills to thrive in their future and launch meaningful, in-demand careers in their communities.

That work has never been more important than it is today. As I've stated earlier, Indigenous youth are the fastest-growing part of our workforce. In fact, enrolment in Indigenous institutes has increased by 36% in the last five years, meaning we have more capable and job-ready students available to enter the workforce and hit the ground running after graduation.

That's why our government is investing a historic \$57 million in additional funding to strengthen the nine Indigenous institutes in Ontario. This additional investment will bring operating funding for Indigenous institutes to more than \$50 million by 2028-29, the highest level in Ontario's history. This stable operating funding gives Indigenous institutes the ability to plan for the future, expand programs, recruit instructors, support students and respond to the needs of their communities.

This investment also includes up to \$33 million to support hundreds of new seats in critical programs that drive and protect our economy: programs in fields like health care, education, trades, STEM and Indigenous languages and studies to provide Indigenous learners with the skills they need to find good-paying jobs and contribute to their communities. The first group of students in these newly funded spots started their programs this fall, with another round of students beginning later on next year.

But we also know students need more than just programming. We're ensuring Indigenous learners have access to modern facilities by providing the nine Indigenous institutes in Ontario with more than \$17 million in capital funding. This includes \$2 million annually in 2025-26 and 2026-27 to support safe and accessible facilities for Indigenous learners. We're also providing a total of \$1.5 million so that Indigenous institutes can acquire the latest equipment and learning tools so students receive a cutting-edge education that will allow them to flourish in their future careers.

In addition to providing direct operating and capital funding to Indigenous institutes, our government also provides funding to colleges and universities so they can develop culturally appropriate programs and services to support Indigenous learners. Starting in 2026-27, our government is investing \$21 million a year, an increase of \$3 million annually, so Indigenous learners can access and succeed in post-secondary education.

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Our government is also continuing to break down barriers for Indigenous students through the Indigenous Student Bursary, a bursary that supports Indigenous students in financial need at colleges, universities and Indigenous institutes. Our government distributes \$2.5 million annually through the bursary, so that Indigenous learners graduate ready to protect our economy and support their communities from day one.

Our government also provided Indigenous institutes with \$750,000 in 2025-26, to provide targeted supports for learners with disabilities. In 2026-27, this investment increased to \$850,000. As a result of this funding, the Indigenous institutes created accommodation plans for 153 students, completed learning assessments for 45 students and provided 19 professional development training sessions for staff.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: This year, our government also increased funding for the Indigenous Institutes Mental Health Grant from \$1 million a year to \$1.5 million annually. Last year, this funding allowed Indigenous institutes to distribute more than 630 wellness kits, fund nine full-time staff positions, create eight new community partnerships and give more than 190 students access to counselling services.

As our government takes historic steps to unleash northern Ontario's economic potential, we know that we must continue to prioritize post-secondary education and training. After all, Ontario's colleges, universities and Indigenous institutes are building a strong workforce in key northern Ontario industries like mining and forestry. That workforce is vital to building an economy that is more competitive, resilient and self-reliant.

That's why our government is investing \$10 million in the new First Nations Resource Development Scholarship—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you, Minister.

We'll now go to the official opposition. I recognize MPP Sattler.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I'm going to stay on the topic of work-integrated learning. I also take in students in my office and am a huge proponent of the value of work-integrated learning. But one of the questions I have for the minister is whether the ministry tracks whether work-integrated learning placements are paid or unpaid.

We are at a time when the financial pressures on students are rising. Cost of living affects everyone, students in particular, and participating in work-integrated learning that is unpaid can be a barrier for students who might have to relocate or give up part-time work in order to do the work-integrated learning.

Do you track how many of these placements are paid versus unpaid? What other kinds of data do you use or collect to monitor the quality of these placements? And are there efforts to make sure that placements are available across disciplines, not just in STEM or the priority fields that you've talked about?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Absolutely. So, off the top, we don't track whether a placement is paid or not, but we do have the Ontario co-op tax credit that, in 2024-25, we saw over 30,000 employers use that co-op tax credit to be able to on-board students, so we are seeing good success. But I think I go back to the numbers—that 79% of students at colleges are utilizing work-integrated learning and 76% at our universities are using work-integrated learning.

I would be remiss to not mention: Thank you for taking co-op students as well. The impact on our students is significant. But it's something that we're currently—we're always reviewing and understanding the youth unemployment that's challenging right now. We want to ensure that those soft skills are met across all sectors, not just in key priority sectors.

Last year, I think I did about a dozen round tables in all sectors, including tourism, recognizing that tourism is a big driver of the economy. I did a round table as well in agriculture. So we value the importance of work-integrated learning, co-ops and internships at all sectors, but we also utilize third parties like Riipen and Mitacs to be able to help facilitate some of those more nuanced work-integrated learning placements.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Okay. I want to go back to the question I had asked in the previous round about the Council of Ontario Universities' projection: one million university grads needed over the next decade; many, many college grads needed over the next decade—and this is across a range of disciplines, not just the four priority areas.

Your ministry has announced that there will be an additional 70,000 seats over four years, which is going a bit of the way there but not quite the one million grads that we need. Is there going to be funding for additional seats and will that funding apply to programs that are outside those four priority areas but that do address local or regional labour market needs?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I think the 70,000 seats really did address local labour market needs. As I mentioned earlier, we saw over a thousand letters of support across all sectors, not specific to STEM or health care. We really, truly saw it in all the sectors, like paralegal, HR, aviation. And you know, 3,000 of those 70,000 seats did go into other local labour market priorities.

I think our record speaks for itself. In 2024, we invested \$1.3 billion to stabilize the sector after unilateral decisions by the federal government really destabilized the financial stability of the sector. In budget 2025, we added almost \$1 billion. Part of those billion dollars was \$750 million for STEM seats, adding 20,500 STEM seats. We added another 7,800 skilled trades seats in budget 2025 as well. We're rounding out about 100,000 new seats added to our post-secondary sector. That's on top of the over 600,000 students that are currently enrolled in post-secondary in Ontario.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I want to ask about spending for research, vote item 3005. Again, the Council of Ontario Universities, in its 2025 pre-budget submission, reported that Ontario spends \$563 per student in provincial research funding, which is much, much less than the Canadian

average of \$1,165 per student. There was a small increase in operating funding this year for research and a reduction in research infrastructure capital.

Can the minister tell us how we're doing in per-student funding for research compared to the Canadian average now? Are we still so far behind other provinces? And if that is the case, why are we not investing more in research funding, particularly at a time where there is such instability in the economy and we're dealing with tariffs and AI and a trade war and everything else?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Thank you for the question. I think it's worth noting that since we formed government in 2018, we've invested over \$2 billion in research across Ontario's universities and colleges. It's not a coincidence that we have the largest life sciences jurisdiction in Canada. That just didn't happen by coincidence; it happened because of the ecosystem we have created with research and the graduates, frankly, we're producing.

We have three of the top tech regions in North America. Again, that does not happen by coincidence. That happens by driving research dollars, including those \$2 billion invested which—we have Toronto in the top three. We have Waterloo, number seven in North America, and in my end of the province, Kanata North in Ottawa at number 11. Those don't just happen by chance; those happen by consistent, significant investment into research. The \$2 billion we've invested since 2018 has had a significant impact. We've seen over 500 patents, 76 spinoff companies, as well as 600 new jobs.

But being that I'm the Minister of Colleges and Universities as well as research, I'd be remiss to not mention the 150,000 training opportunities that have been provided since 2018 to our post-secondary students. But it is worth noting overall research funding is going up 10% this year, to \$328 million.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I want to ask a question about complaints that were submitted to the Ombudsman's office over the last year about colleges and universities. There was a record number of complaints in 2025-26, concerns related to fees, refunds, accommodations, appeals, access to student services. There was an Indigenous college student who was told he couldn't access requested counselling services because of staffing shortages.

My question to the minister is, why is there no dedicated funding in the estimates plan to strengthen student support services, especially around mental health, accessibility, and Indigenous student supports?

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Hon. Nolan Quinn: Well, I can't speak for specific instances of student challenges that have happened over the last year—but understanding that student support services are provided at the local institution, and our \$6.4-billion historic funding model has stabilized all the institutions to ensure that they can focus on their core mandate: providing success to our students and providing support to our students.

We provide \$6.1 million a year for campus safety, as well as over a million dollars for Indigenous campus safety, as well as mental health supports that are consistent

year over year, to ensure that the challenges across the globe and across the economy aren't necessarily bogging down our students and they can focus on their studies.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: In the estimates document, there is \$2.5 million that is allocated for the mental health action grant. Can you tell us how that \$2.5 million is being spread across post-secondary institutions—because it's not a lot per institution. How many students, campuses, is it expected to support, and what outcomes will you be expecting institutions to report? And this is time limited, so how will those mental health services be sustained once the funding ends?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Before I pass it over to my deputy, I think it's worth noting that mental health is important to everyone, as well as safety on campus. Students go to get their great education, and they should be focusing on their education. So we want to ensure that we have consistent supports available across all publicly assisted institutions to ensure that our students are supported whenever they're going through their studies for post-secondary and landing good-paying jobs afterwards.

I'll pass it over to the deputy.

Mr. David Wai: I would just underline that the ministry, in 2025-26, had \$35.6 million for mental health supports. That includes that \$2.5 million that you mentioned, but also includes things like the Mental Health Worker Grant, which is \$4.5 million; the Mental Health Services Grant, which is \$6 million; the Indigenous Institutes Mental Health Grant, which is \$1.5 million; Good2Talk, which is \$5 million; as well as other funding that we provide that adds up to the \$35 million.

In particular, when you mentioned the mental health action plan—that is money provided to colleges and universities for three years, 2024-27. It really focuses on policy development within each of those universities and colleges, and implementation, including things like data collection, but also around specific plans and policies in terms of mental health supports within their individual colleges and universities.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: One of the things that happens at post-secondary institutions when there is not the access that students need to the supports they need is that student unions step in to fill that gap.

There was legislation that announced that the government was going to be determining what ancillary fees student unions could collect so that they can continue to offer programs like mental health services, peer support, mentorship, tutoring, food banks, and other kinds of services. So I wonder if the minister can tell us where things are at in terms of this decision about ancillary fees. And when will the changes come into force?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Hard-working students and families truly deserve to know where their fees are going—whether that's through tuition, admission requirements, how tuition revenues are used, or, as you've referenced, ancillary fees.

We actually just recently wrapped up consultation with the sector, and we are just going through the data that has been presented.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Is there a timeline on when the changes will be put in place?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: At this time, we don't want to necessarily rush it through. We want to analyze the data that has been presented—very fulsome data through all the institutions across Ontario.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: That was Bill 33. There is also, as you know, Minister, Bill 166. These new pieces of legislation have put increased demands, administrative and regulatory requirements on individual post-secondary institutions, and there's also pressure on the resources available to implement the new policies that are required, for example, in Bill 166 on racism and hate on campus and student mental health.

Many institutions, colleges and universities are still reporting deficits. Are there plans from your ministry to provide assistance to institutions so that they can deliver on the new policies that they are required to have in place, particularly around racism and hate on campus and student mental health?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Thank you for that. I think it's worth noting again that we do provide \$6.1 million for campus safety. But Bill 166—I appreciate you referencing that. The reason we needed to bring Bill 166 forward is because we were concerned about some of the issues that were happening on campus.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I think I go back to the \$6.4-billion investment we just made over seven months ago to stabilize the sector, understanding the federal government made many unilateral changes that destabilized the sector. That's why we've stood up consistently in 2023 with the \$1.3-billion Postsecondary Education Sustainability Fund, over a billion dollars in budget 2025 and now \$6.4 billion in budget 2026—almost \$8.7 billion we've invested in the last three fiscal years.

We will continue working with our leaders of all post-secondary institutions to ensure that we continue to have a world-class education system.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thirteen seconds.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: That's okay.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): We will now go to the third party, and I recognize MPP Watt.

MPP Tyler Watt: Thank you, Chair. Also, I forgot to thank all of the legislative staff that are here today. It's so tough to sit down for this long. I'm struggling a bit right now. Thank you for being here and for all that you do.

I'm glad my colleague MPP Sattler brought up Bill 33. Minister, thank you for the update on it. I'm really glad that you are doing consultations. I know many student groups who were looking forward to that, and I know that they had planned meetings, so thank you for doing that. It's been a really big stress on their minds.

These groups currently fund services like health and dental, food banks, transit, mental health, peer supports, club services. I even visited a university—I think it was Brock; it all kind of blurs together—where there are enough students that they're actually funding new routes

for the actual municipality. That's how important these organizations are. With Bill 33 passing, they don't know how it's going to be implemented and how it's going to affect their budget and their bottom line.

I'd like to know: Has the ministry estimated how much revenue student associations could lose because of Bill 33? And is there any funding in these estimates to replace those key services that will disappear or are reduced?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I think it's worth noting our intention with Bill 33 is to understand what could and should be optional for students. Recognizing the impact of the students' hard-earned dollars—quite often, ancillary fees are a bit of a grey area for the institutions. There's one institution specifically that I've received some correspondence on, and it's referencing bus passes. There's a cap on bus passes, and if we get to that limit or that ceiling then any student after that is not able to withdraw from the bus passes. That has caused some consternation with the parents and the students because this is a couple hundred dollars that is being added on and it's not consistently applied across all students. It seems to be first come, first serve.

I think I'll reference back to whenever we brought forward Bill 33. It was, especially when it comes to ancillary fees, understanding what could or should be optional for the students.

MPP Tyler Watt: Thank you, Minister. Are there any categories of student services that are assumed to be financially affected through this?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: We haven't necessarily looked into that data yet, as we just referenced. We just finished up our consultation, including with some great student groups across the province, and we heard their feedback as well.

MPP Tyler Watt: Okay, thank you. It's more of a matter of when, but if the ancillary fee revenue falls—I kind of mentioned this earlier—is there a plan for any contingency within the \$7.11-billion operating grant envelope to replace any of that revenue, or is that to potentially come post-consultations?

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Hon. Nolan Quinn: Again, I always look to the initial comments of what could or should be optional, but there are different student associations across different institutions. The one I would really love to highlight is Western University's student association group. They bring it to the electorate every year. So, every year, they vote on what ancillary fees are going to be accepted and which ones are not. I truly believe the student association at Western is leading the way with best practices.

MPP Tyler Watt: I've had a similar experience. I've met Western; they're an awesome group there, and I've seen that pretty much across the board with many of the places that I visited. These groups really do try to be as transparent and put the power into the hands of the students on voting, like if there's ever a new fee introduced. I just wanted to share that.

Okay. That's great for that update.

I would like to discuss—I'm kind of piggybacking off this, but these are important topics—student mental health and campus supports. It's no secret that young people are struggling with mental health. I would argue everyone is—how can you not in this world?

Under vote item 3002-1, under which transfer payment line are the Mental Health Services Grant, Mental Health Worker Grant, Indigenous Institutes Mental Health Grant and Postsecondary Mental Health Action Plan funded in 2026-27?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Absolutely. Before I pass it over to my deputy to provide further context, as I referenced earlier, we provide annually \$6.1 million for campus safety, as well as over a million dollars for Indigenous campus safety.

But I'll pass it over to Deputy Wai to be able to provide further details of the funding lines for this year.

MPP Tyler Watt: Sure. Thank you.

Mr. David Wai: Those grants in particular would be distributed depending on the college, university or Indigenous institute. We have a number of lines under transfer payments, one related to grants for college operating grants, one related to grants for Indigenous students, as well as grants for university operating costs. So, those would be the primary lines that those programs would be transferring payment to the individual institutions.

MPP Tyler Watt: Okay. Thank you. What exact amount is allocated to each of those programs?

Mr. David Wai: As I mentioned earlier, roughly, for 2025-26, we had \$4.5 million for the Mental Health Worker Grant; \$6 million for the Mental Health Services Grant; \$1.5 million for the Indigenous Institutes Mental Health Grant; \$5 million for Good2Talk, as well as half a million for the Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health; and the \$2.5 million that was mentioned earlier—the mental health action plan grant.

MPP Tyler Watt: How does each amount compare with 2025-26?

Mr. David Wai: Minister, I'll ask my ADM of strategic policy and planning to come.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Please state your name and your position.

Ms. Zoë Kroeker: Hello. Zoë Kroeker. I'm the assistant deputy minister for strategic policy and planning.

You were asking about the mental health amounts and how much they change year to year. It has actually been the same for the last two years.

MPP Tyler Watt: Okay. That's easy enough. Thank you.

So under vote item 3002-1, approximately \$7.155 billion is provided in college, university and Indigenous institute operating grants. How much of those grants is specifically restricted or earmarked for student mental health services?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Again, we've been pretty consistent with our funding across the last couple of years, as ADM Kroeker just mentioned. But I'll pass it over to the deputy to provide those details.

Mr. David Wai: The dedicated amounts are the \$35 million that we spoke of. But I would say, as the minister indicated, each individual university and college can make decisions around the money to transfer from our broader operating grant to support additional programs as they see fit, in terms of the mental health needs of their particular university or college. They have the flexibility within the broader pieces to understand what the needs are on the student services side.

MPP Tyler Watt: Thank you.

Is any portion permanent base funding in that?

Mr. David Wai: Sorry, just to understand, you're saying, is any part of the \$7 billion part of the—so \$7 billion is our base funding going forward, a 30% increase. Again, how the individual college or university chooses to allocate for the student services is their decision at the local level about what they think is needed at their individual institution.

MPP Tyler Watt: Thank you.

What service volume or staffing targets are attached to that mental health funding?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: As the deputy and I have mentioned, it is on the individual institution level to be able to understand their breakdown and allocation of the dollars we give them.

I don't know if you want to provide further context to that, Deputy?

Mr. David Wai: Yes, Minister.

I can ask ADM Kroeker to come back again. We do have the individuals for each of those. For example, for the Mental Health Worker Grant, there are individual outcomes we expect for those workers—a number of workers that would be paid for or paid from part or whole by that grant.

We can provide those additional details if you would like. I can ask ADM Kroeker to come and provide more detail if that's helpful.

MPP Tyler Watt: Sure.

Ms. Zoë Kroeker: I'll get it right this time: Zoë Kroeker, assistant deputy minister of strategic policy and planning division.

Okay, so you're asking about what are the numbers, the metrics for each of the grants? For the Mental Health Services Grant, that goes to colleges and universities, and it assists with mental health awareness, counselling, therapies. For instance, in 2023-24, it funded 140 positions across colleges and universities. Those were for counsellors, social workers, nurses—people who are providing direct services, and that allowed—over 560,000 students were served through those—

MPP Tyler Watt: What was the student number?

Ms. Zoë Kroeker: Over 560,000 students.

MPP Tyler Watt: Excellent.

Any of the resources go towards staff, by any chance?

Ms. Zoë Kroeker: This is the grant that goes to the services themselves. So they're providing the service and then there's also a worker grant that actually supports the resources themselves, the FTE that provide it.

MPP Tyler Watt: So that worker grant is separate from the other one.

Do you mind expanding on that?

Ms. Zoë Kroeker: Yes. I can go through it. The Mental Health Service Grant is for the services themselves. That funded positions and then actual service hours. Then there's the Mental Health Worker Grant, which goes to colleges and universities. That assists with hiring direct service professionals, so there's additional professionals that come on board from that.

So in the same time period that grant funded 163 positions for supports and that allowed the institutions to reduce wait times and provide more service offerings.

There's also a program that we provide: We do a mental health and addictions call for proposals, and that is something that allows our colleges and universities and our Indigenous institutes to actually apply with new innovative best practice programs and ideas. For instance, in 2025-26 we had eight institutions—two universities, three Indigenous institutes and three colleges—that came in with new ideas for service delivery in their local area. So we're trying to think about services to students, having the workers there to provide that and then also some innovative new pilot projects.

We also fund the Centre for Innovation in Campus Mental Health. We fund that. It's basically a partnership between Colleges Ontario, Council of Ontario Universities and then some student groups. It's focused on knowledge and training in the mental health space. We fund this centre to provide knowledge exchanges and best practices across our post-secondary education institutions, and it's really been quite good for building institutional capacity.

Then, the deputy also mentioned Good2Talk, which I wanted to bring up because that's something that we fund and it provides free and confidential support services to students. It's an organization that partners with the Kids Help Phone and something called ConnexOntario. It provides live counselling 24 hours a day, so it's good.

MPP Tyler Watt: Thank you very much. I appreciate that.

In just my final couple of minutes here. I think I'll—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You have two minutes and four seconds.

MPP Tyler Watt: Okay. I think I'm going to talk about—getting back to the programs being cut and whatnot. Under vote item 3002-1, I'm curious, how many colleges and universities does the ministry project will operate at a deficit in 2026-27 after incorporating the higher operating grants provided in these estimates?

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Hon. Nolan Quinn: Before I pass it over to the deputy to provide further details on that, I think it's worth noting: As much as there has been a significant amount of rebalancing in the system, the uncertainty around the federal government's policy decisions on international students is creating a lot of uncertainty for budgets. Even projections of lower intake of international students are not meeting the mark because there's really no rhyme or

reason as to why students are getting approved through IRCC.

But I'll pass it over to the deputy to provide further detail on that.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Mr. David Wai: I'll ask ADM Josh Paul to come and talk about the numbers in terms of the profitability of each—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Please state your name and your position for the record.

Mr. Josh Paul: Thank you. Josh Paul, assistant deputy minister of the financial sustainability division.

In terms of specifically deficits, I don't have that on hand. But as you may be aware, the ministry does track overall financial health across a broad range of metrics, not just related to their particular income statement and where that might be but also their balance sheet, their liquidity and what the future might hold in terms of their risk going forward.

MPP Tyler Watt: Thank you. Just quickly: Are programs being cut being tracked at all by the ministry?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Absolutely. We do track program suspensions and cuts.

MPP Tyler Watt: Okay, thank you very much.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you.

We'll now go to the government, and I'll recognize MPP Leardi.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Minister, we're now in our eighth hour of estimates today. I have a question for you about rural colleges, universities and students and northern colleges, universities and students.

I come from a rural riding: 80% of my riding is agricultural land. We don't have a college located directly in the riding or a university located directly in the riding, but we rely on our local college and our local university to provide us with trained people to make our businesses work, to make our farms work, to make our industries work.

So I have three questions for you. (1) What is the ministry doing to make sure that universities and colleges in northern areas continue to provide the training we need? (2) What is the ministry doing to ensure that universities and colleges in northern areas continue to get the support they need? (3) what is the ministry doing to make sure that students in northern and rural areas continue to get the training they need?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): MPP Leardi, can we ask one question at a time? Because it's late and the—

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Sure.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I feel for the minister.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I think I got all three of those questions out of MPP Leardi. Thank you for those.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: I think he can handle it.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Thank you for that. I think your riding's very similar to mine, very agriculture-based. I have 3,000 square kilometres with the city of Cornwall. The only nuanced difference would be that we do have a college, but we do travel to Ottawa for the university opportunities.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak about an issue that matters deeply to communities across our province: ensuring students in small, northern, and rural communities have access to high-quality post-secondary education and the opportunities that come with it. As we all know, Ontario is a vast province. From the Far North to rural communities, from francophone regions to Indigenous communities, people are proud of where they live and the contributions they make to Ontario's success.

But we also recognize that geography can present unique challenges. That is why our government is ensuring that where a student lives should not determine the quality of education and training they access.

We know that colleges, universities and Indigenous institutes located in northern and rural Ontario are much more than educational institutions; they are economic anchors, they are employers and they are centres of research and innovation. They are often the primary source of skilled talent for the local industry. When these institutions succeed, Ontario communities benefit from that. Businesses gain access to highly skilled graduates, hospitals and health care providers can recruit professionals trained close to home, and employers get the workers they need. Young people have opportunities to build rewarding careers without having to leave the communities they grew up in and they love.

That is why our government has continued to provide targeted support for institutions serving northern and rural regions of Ontario. We recognize that serving smaller populations across large geographic areas comes with additional costs and unique operational challenges. That's why, in 2025-26, our government is investing nearly \$119 million to support colleges and universities serving small, northern and rural communities across Ontario.

And as part of the additional \$6.4 billion invested in colleges and universities and Indigenous institutes through the new long-term funding model, our government will be investing \$284 million in additional funding for small, northern, rural and French institutions, because maintaining strong institutions in every region of Ontario is critical to maintaining access to post-secondary education. It means students can pursue their ambitions closer to home. It means institutions can continue delivering programs that respond to local workforce needs, and it means communities can continue building the skilled workforce they need to grow.

Supporting students in northern and rural communities is not only about providing access to education; it's also about ensuring access to careers. That is why our government has made significant investments to connect post-secondary education directly to the workforce needs of rural Ontario.

Programs such as the Ontario Learn and Stay Grant are making a real difference in rural Ontario. The grant provides support for students entering eligible health care programs in communities where skilled professionals are urgently needed, many of which are in small, northern and rural communities. In return, graduates live and work in the communities where they studied for a term of service

after graduating. It's a straightforward approach. It's a win-win opportunity. It trains people where workers are needed. It gives students a pathway to a rewarding career, and communities retain the skilled professionals they need. To date, we've invested more than \$182 million through the grant to support nearly 13,300 future nurses, paramedics and medical lab technologists in high-needs areas of the province.

We're also investing \$10 million in the First Nations Resource Development Scholarship, which is supporting First Nation students to pursue opportunities in sectors that will drive a prosperous future for Ontario. These scholarships remove financial barriers and ensure First Nation students in Ontario can access education and training connected to careers in resource development and other high-demand fields.

These are practical investments that strengthen communities, support students and build a more resilient provincial economy.

I'd also like to highlight some particularly important funding that reflects our government's focus on Indigenous learners and Indigenous-led education in northern and rural parts of the province. As part of our \$6.4-billion investment, we're providing a historic \$57 million to Indigenous institutes, the most substantial year-to-year increase in operating funding in the history of the sector. This funding will nearly double operating funding for the nine Indigenous institutes in Ontario and bring total operating funding to more than \$50 million annually by 2028-29. Through this investment, Ontario is dedicating \$33 million to fund 780 more seats in labour-market-driven programs that also reflect priorities of the Indigenous communities they serve, again, with a focus on health care, education, skilled trades and STEM, as well as Indigenous languages and studies.

This is about more than increasing enrolment; it's about creating opportunities—opportunities for Indigenous students to access education closer to home, opportunities to build careers in sectors that need workers and opportunities for communities to train and retain the talent they need for the future.

When we invest in northern, rural, francophone and Indigenous communities, we're investing in Ontario's future. We're investing in students who will become nurses, engineers, educators, tradespeople, researchers and entrepreneurs. We are investing in businesses that drive our province's economy, and we're investing in a post-secondary system that remains strong, sustainable and responsive to the needs of the people all across Ontario.

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The work we're doing will create opportunities that extend far beyond any single campus. It will strengthen local economies, it will support workforce development, it will allow communities to retain talent, and it will ensure that students, regardless of where they live, have access to the tools they need to succeed. Because whether a student lives in downtown Toronto, in the community of Akwesasne in my riding, a northern city like Thunder Bay or a small community anywhere in between, they should have the

opportunity to pursue their goals and build a successful career. That is why these investments are designed to support strong students, strong institutions and strong communities across Ontario.

Mr. Anthony Leardi: Thank you.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): I recognize MPP Jordan.

Mr. John Jordan: Thank you, Minister, for the presentation today. Like my colleague from Essex, I represent a rural riding, Lanark–Frontenac–Kingston. One of the things you've talked about is an investment of \$1.7 billion for 70,000 new educational seats for in-demand jobs, with the goal of leading our young people into good careers going forward. Bringing it home for me to Lanark–Frontenac–Kingston, can you tell me what the impact, you feel, will be for an area like mine?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Absolutely. Thank you, MPP Jordan, for that question. When our government was elected for a historic third term, we made a promise to Ontario that in the face of unprecedented global economic uncertainty, we would do everything in our power to protect Ontario, to protect our economy, to protect our workers and to protect the opportunities that will allow the next generation to build their lives and careers right here at home.

Ontario's colleges and universities are central to that work. They are where the workers that families rely on are trained. They are where local businesses get their highly skilled talent. They are where our economy becomes stronger and more resilient. Securing that pipeline has never been more important than it is today.

As tariff pressures and ongoing trade uncertainty threaten jobs, investment and economic growth, Ontario cannot afford to stand still. We need a workforce that is ready to compete, innovate and grow, regardless of what challenges come from beyond our borders. Building that workforce is not optional; it is essential to protecting Ontario's economic future.

That is why, six months ago, our government took historic action to support students, institutions and employers across the province. We introduced a game-changing \$6.4-billion funding model for Ontario's colleges, universities and Indigenous institutes. It marked the beginning of a new era of stability, certainty and long-term strength for our post-secondary sector—an era defined by strategic growth, an era focused on responding to local labour market needs, and an era driven by our determination to ensure Ontario has the talent, skills and workforce capacity required to succeed in an increasingly competitive world.

Now, we are taking the next step in that work. Following a robust call-for-proposal process launched earlier this summer, with the support of over a thousand local businesses across Ontario, our government has invested \$1.7 billion to fund 70,000 more seats in key economy-driving programs at colleges and universities across the province. This includes more than 40,000 newly funded post-secondary seats in STEM. It also includes 16,100 seats in health care, 7,900 seats in education, 3,800 seats in trades and 3,000 seats in other local labour market-driven programs.

For your community in eastern Ontario, MPP Jordan, that investment will have a significant impact. From Queen's University to St. Lawrence College, eastern Ontario now has thousands of new seats to build a strong labour pipeline for your community. These aren't just numbers on a page; these are future nurses, personal support workers and early childhood educators training at St. Lawrence College, and future engineers, researchers, and health care professionals studying at Queen's University. Future graduates will stay in eastern Ontario, start families, open businesses and strengthen communities across Lanark–Frontenac–Kingston.

That's exactly why this investment matters. Each seat is a significant investment in the talent and workforce this region needs to continue growing. When I think about these seats and the students who will fill them, I think about one word: opportunity. With each dollar we invest and each seat that opens, we are not only giving young people the opportunity to better themselves and land rewarding, good-paying jobs and careers, but also granting more opportunities to ensure that eastern Ontario has the workforce it needs for the future. It means hospitals, schools, manufacturers, construction companies and small businesses across eastern Ontario will have greater access to the talent they need to succeed.

Because when we talk about building an Ontario that can compete on a global stage, that starts with building competitive communities, which is why this expansion was designed around local labour market needs. Each college and university was required to work with their local businesses and chambers of commerce to put forward proposals for seats that produce the graduates that employers in their community need. Because we know what Waterloo needs is different than what Sudbury needs or what Kingston needs or what Sarnia needs.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute remaining.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: This investment is not growth for the sake of growth's sake; it is targeted, strategic investment in our workers, our businesses and our local economies. It's an investment that protects access to world-class education, protects our critical industries and protects Ontario. Every new student space represents a future worker entering a sector that Ontario depends on. It means more nurses providing care in our hospitals and long-term-care homes; more teachers supporting growing classrooms and giving students the tools they need to succeed; more engineers, scientists and technology professionals driving innovation and economic growth; and more tradespeople building the homes, roads, transit and critical infrastructure our province needs.

At a time when jurisdictions around the world are competing for talent, Ontario is choosing to grow our own.

Thank you, Chair—before you cut me off.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You had six seconds. I now recognize the official opposition and MPP Sattler for 13 minutes and 45 seconds.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Minister, I'd like to follow up on some questions I had asked you in an earlier round. One is

around the delays for students in receiving their OSAP. It is affecting students at private career colleges and also private institutions in Ontario right now. There are probably students at public colleges and universities who are waiting, but I know for a fact that it is affecting all students at private career colleges and private institutions.

You said that there is a process that your ministry is undertaking to review private career colleges. I have two questions: (1) Is it the same for private institutions as private career colleges? (2) I understand that in previous years these reviews were completed in August; why are we now on October 1 and the review is still under way?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Yes, private institutions and private career colleges must be reviewed and reapproved each year to maintain OSAP eligibility and that review process is ongoing.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: And why this year is it so much later than in previous years?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: As I've stated earlier, we're aware of concerns and irregularities involving OSAP at some private career colleges and the ministry is currently investigating.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Okay, thank you very much.

I wanted to ask again about the impact of OSAP on students, particularly students who are under-represented in our post-secondary institutions. We know from a survey that was just conducted by OUSA and CSA that 65% of students said that OSAP is their main source of financial support. Half said that long-term debt is their greatest concern about having to rely on student loans now rather than grants.

So how is your ministry going to be tracking the impact—the long-term impact—of these changes on access, on persistence, on completion, especially for groups that have been historically under-represented in our sector?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Absolutely. We are continually, always tracking and referencing key data points, including understanding the success of our students.

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I think it's worth noting that affordability is a major focus of our government and has been since day one. We froze tuition, and we reduced tuition by 10% in 2019, which has saved over a billion dollars for families and students across Ontario—over \$1,800 per average university student and \$450 per average college student—and those savings will continue to be felt. If history speaks for itself—we just went through significantly high inflation across Ontario and Canada right now. During the five years of NDP government, you tripled the rate of inflation, adding to tuition. We froze tuition during this period of time.

And I think it's worth noting that because a PC government is in power right now, tuition is still affordable in Ontario; if it was an NDP government or a Liberal government, understanding the past history, tuition would be over \$15,000 right now.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Tuition in Ontario is still among the highest of all Canadian provinces, so there's a lot of work

that the government still has to do to make sure that cost is not a barrier to access.

One of the things that I've heard the minister say is that the lowest-income students, who will be the most affected by the change from grants to loans, will still be able to access an enhanced Student Access Guarantee. There is nothing that I could see in the estimates document for 2026-27 that talks about what kind of funding is going to be available for the enhanced Student Access Guarantee. So can the minister tell us how much is going to be provided to institutions, where the money is coming from, and how the ministry is going to ensure that institutions have the resources to meet the needs of low-income students, students with disabilities, and other students who face barriers to access to post-secondary?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I think, first and foremost, it's worth acknowledging the impact our institutions have when it comes to bursaries and grants for the students they serve. We have almost \$2 billion of bursaries and grants that our universities and colleges give out to students on an annual basis.

I think it's also worth noting some other programs where we have support for the students. The Ontario Learn and Stay Grant is one that I'm particularly proud of, with over 13,300 students accessing paid tuition, books, and other educational costs, to commit to working in an area of need. We also have the PSW Learn and Earn program; we have Better Jobs Ontario, through the Ministry of Labour; as well as the First Nations Resource Development Scholarship—the \$10 million that just started this year.

I'll go back to the enhanced Student Access Guarantee. The funds do come through tuition set aside; it's not through government dollars. Ultimately, we project about \$57 million being added to the Student Access Guarantee in the coming years.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Are new requirements being given to institutions as to how much they are to set aside? Is that the process to get that enhanced Student Access Guarantee?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: We're ensuring that the enhanced Student Access Guarantee is meeting the needs of qualified low-income earners, to ensure that they still have access to post-secondary.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Are all institutions aware of how much is in the enhanced Student Access Guarantee to address the needs of the highest-need students?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: The Student Access Guarantee is a fund that's managed by the individual institutions. So they're definitely well aware of what's in their fund.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: I want to ask a question about the Campus Safety Grant. You referenced that earlier today, about funding for gender-based and sexual violence prevention efforts on post-secondary campuses. That grant was established several decades ago, in 1991, with \$3 million that was to be split by all public post-secondary institutions. We are now more than 30 years later, and the grant is currently only at \$6 million. In terms of inflation, it's worth far less than it was when it was initially created,

and we know that incidents of gender-based violence and sexual violence on campuses continues to be a real problem.

So I would like to know if the ministry has plans to increase investments that are available to campuses for gender-based violence prevention, survivor supports and campus safety programming.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I think it's worth noting, before I pass it over to the deputy to answer with the details and the specifics, that we have been consistent in our funding over the last two years. Every student should be able to arrive on campus and gather their education and their training in a safe environment; I think that's a non-starter.

Recognizing that we've been consistent with our funding, I'll allow the deputy to provide further details on that. All students should be able to arrive on campus safely and ensure that they feel safe on campus to be able to be trained. Deputy?

Mr. David Wai: As indicated, the Campus Safety Grant is a \$6.1-million grant that we provide to publicly assisted colleges and universities around improving campus safety and security. That includes student-focused initiatives like safety education, awareness campaigns and other training. The ministry also provides \$1.35 million over three years to Indigenous institutes through the Indigenous institutes campus safety grant to help offset costs of initiatives and forums related to Indigenous institutes as well.

I'd also highlight, there are two statutes that were recently introduced in the last few years: the Strengthening Post-secondary Institutions and Students Act, 2022, enacted to better address faculty and staff sexual misconduct toward students; and the Strengthening Accountability and Student Supports Act, 2024, which was passed to combat hate and racism as well, including anti-Indigenous racism, anti-Black racism, anti-Semitism and Islamophobia.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Thank you. I'd like now to ask a question about budget vote item 3002-4, deferred maintenance in the post-secondary education program. Last year, when you were before us, Minister, you confirmed that there's a current backlog of deferred maintenance at colleges and universities of \$6.3 billion.

I am wondering if you could please share with this committee what the current dollar amount for the deferred maintenance backlog is. Can you break that down by universities, colleges and Indigenous institutes?

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I think it's worth noting, over the next 10 years, we're committing \$5.5 billion to post-secondary infrastructure across colleges, universities and Indigenous institutes. We understand the need to have facilities that are up to date for our learners. I'm surprised I haven't mentioned them, but some of our health care learning labs—how impressive they are when it comes to the technology that's in those labs.

We'll continue to be there for our post-secondary institutions to ensure that they're sustainable both in capital and in their infrastructure moving forward.

Ms. Peggy Sattler: Okay. Thank you very much. That concludes my questions.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you.

Interjection.

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Go ahead.

MPP Tyler Watt: Thank you. How much time do I have?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): You have one minute and 56 seconds.

MPP Tyler Watt: Great. All right, I'll just end with an email that I received from a student at Carleton University. They do live in my riding of Nepean, and they get the max OSAP. After their tuition is paid, they're left with \$420 per month, and that's before rent, groceries, textbooks, bills. It's impossible to live off of \$420 a month.

So, Minister, my question is, in the new OSAP model, in what determines how much someone gets, how much money is being put towards the max OSAP, and will you be changing that in future years?

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): One minute.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I think it's worth noting that if this student was eligible—because it's an eligibility-based program—for \$10,000 in support from OSAP last year, the breakdown between grants and loans would be different this year. But they're still eligible for the similar amount of money that they would have received in previous years.

MPP Tyler Watt: Sorry, but they're already getting the max. I think it's a little bit above \$15,000. So after tuition, they're left with \$420 a month.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: I personally can't speak on individual cases, but understanding that we have only changed the grant-to-loan ratios, when it comes to the impact on students—

MPP Tyler Watt: I'm not even talking about grants. Just in general, that's what they have for that year, for those eight months, to live.

Hon. Nolan Quinn: Well, I think that's the important reason why the colleges and universities provide their own bursaries. We see over \$2 billion of bursaries that are provided at the institution level to ensure that they're meeting those needs, but we also have the—

The Chair (Mr. Brian Riddell): Thank you for your time today, Minister. We appreciate it.

This concludes the committee's consideration of the estimates of the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security.

Standing order 69 requires the Chair put, without further amendment or debate, every question necessary to dispose of the estimates. Are members ready to vote?

Shall vote 3001, ministry administration program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

Shall vote 3002, post-secondary education program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

Shall vote 3005, research program, carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

I've got about 10 more pages. No, I don't.

Shall the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence and Security carry? All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

Shall the Chair report the 2026-27 estimates of the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence

and Security to the House? All those in favour? All those opposed? Carried.

This concludes our consideration of estimates of the Ministry of Colleges, Universities, Research Excellence

and Security. I would like to thank Minister Quinn, the ministry officials and staff for their time today.

This committee now stands adjourned.

The committee adjourned at 1832.

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